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Literary and Theological Modernisms:  
Rainer Maria Rilke, T. S. Eliot, and Józef Wittlin

Joanna Magdalena Rzepa

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in English and Comparative Literary Studies

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## Declaration

This thesis is submitted to the University of Warwick in support of my application for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. It has been composed by myself and has not been submitted in any previous application for any degree.

A shortened version of the 'Rethinking the Incarnation' section of chapter three is under review for publication in the collection *Religion, Philosophy and Myth in T. S. Eliot's Poetry*, ed. by Scott Freer et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars, forthcoming).

## Abstract

My thesis investigates the relationship between literary modernism and modernist theology, discussing the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke, T. S. Eliot, and Józef Wittlin in the context of the theological debates of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I aim to establish parallels between contemporary theologians' and religious thinkers' attempts to rethink Christianity's place in modernity and the poetic explorations of similar issues in the works of Rilke, Eliot, and Wittlin.

The first chapter of my thesis discusses the debates surrounding the so-called 'Modernist crisis' in the Roman Catholic Church, in which two different visions of Catholicism – the neo-scholastic orthodoxy and the progressive Modernism – came into conflict. In the following years, similar disputes took place in the Church of England and the American Presbyterian Church. Thinkers associated with the 'Modernist' understanding of Christianity considered it necessary to develop a new apologetic that would be capable of responding to contemporary philosophy and recent developments in psychology and science. They drew attention to the value of personal experience and individual conscience, began reclaiming the mystical traditions of the past, and became increasingly interested in the psychology of religious experience.

In the three literary chapters of my thesis, I argue that the reconceptualisation of the relationship between the religious experience of contemporary Christians and the inherited doctrinal tradition – central to Modernist theologians' attempts to reconcile Christianity with the critical project of modernity – is also at the heart of the poetic projects of Rilke, Eliot, and Wittlin. I argue that Rilke's engagement with Orthodox iconography, Eliot's investment in the search for the meaning of mystical experience and its relation to Christian dogma, and Wittlin's reinterpretation of traditional hagiography are all attempts at reinterpreting medieval Christian traditions and reconceptualising their place

in modernity. Their parallel poetic explorations of the relationship between Christianity and modernity, I argue, demonstrate the existence of a complex network of interactions and exchanges between theological and cultural modernisms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

## **Note on Translations**

All translations from German and Polish, unless otherwise indicated, are my own. Quotations from poems are given in the body of the thesis in English translation, with the originals provided in footnotes and the appendix. Quotations from prose texts are given only in English translation, with appropriate references provided in footnotes. When I refer to works written in languages other than English of which no English translation exists, I provide the translation of the title in parentheses in the body of the thesis and enclose it in square brackets in the corresponding footnotes and the bibliography.

All quotations from the Bible are from the King James Version. This is the translation that Eliot used. While Rilke and Wittlin used the German and Polish Bible respectively, for the sake of consistency, I quote only from the King James Version.

While writing this thesis, I benefited immensely from the linguistic expertise of my multilingual colleagues. I would like to thank Santiago Oyarzabal for his help with Spanish, Andrea Selleri for his help with Italian, Michael Tsang for his help with French, and Máté Vince for his help with French and Latin.

And now, when all is said, the question will still recur [...]. What does poetry mean? This unique expression, which cannot be replaced by any other, still seems to be trying to express something beyond itself. And this, we feel, is also what the other arts, and religion, and philosophy are trying to express: and that is what impels us to seek in vain to translate the one into the other.

A. C. Bradley, 'Poetry for Poetry's Sake', 1901<sup>1</sup>

What is deepest and most deeply felt in life, the transitoriness of human beings, illness, death, the vanity of opinions and convictions, cannot be expressed in the language of theology, which for centuries has responded by turning out perfectly rounded balls, easy to roll but impenetrable. Twentieth-century poetry, or what is most essential in it, gathers data on the ultimate in the human condition and elaborates, to handle the data, a language which may or may not be used by theology.

Czesław Miłosz, 'Theology, Poetry', 1997<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A. C. Bradley, 'Poetry for Poetry's Sake', in *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, 2nd edn (London: Macmillan, 1963), pp. 3–34 (p. 26).

<sup>2</sup> Czesław Miłosz, 'Theology, Poetry', in *Road-Side Dog*, trans. by Robert Hass and Czesław Miłosz (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux), p. 21.

## Introduction

### Modernism and Religion: A Literary Perspective

Recent years have seen a number of works bringing new critical perspectives in modernist studies; unprecedented attention has been devoted to the approaches that promised to shed light on the so far neglected aspects of modernism and become correctives to the earlier narratives of modernism. Among the reconfigurations that have become particularly popular with critics one can enumerate: global, cosmopolitan and transnational modernisms, feminist and queer modernism, modernism and colonialism, modernism in music, film, and cinema, and mass culture modernism.<sup>1</sup> Such an impressive scope of interdisciplinary research topics has considerably nuanced our understanding of modernism as a cultural and aesthetic movement and directed renewed critical attention to the ‘sociocultural matrix’ in which modernism emerged.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, while traditionally modernism has been understood to signal ‘a dialectical opposition to what is not functionally “modern”, namely “tradition”’,<sup>3</sup> recently this understanding of the movement

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Jessica Berman, *Modernist Commitments: Ethics, Politics, and Transnational Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); *Modernism and Race*, ed. by Len Platt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Geetha Ramanathan, *Locating Gender in Modernism: The Outsider Female* (New York: Routledge, 2012); *Gender in Modernism: New Geographies, Complex Intersections*, ed. by Bonnie Kime Scott (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Jodie Medd, *Lesbian Scandal and the Culture of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Joshua Yumibe, *Moving Color: Early Film, Mass Culture, Modernism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012); Allison Pease, *Modernism, Mass Culture, and the Aesthetics of Obscenity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). A brief but comprehensive overview of this new research in modernist studies can be found in the recently published *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms*, ed. by Peter Brooker et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, 2nd edn, ed. by Michael H. Levenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, ed. by Mark A. Wollaeger and Matt Eatough (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); and *A Handbook of Modernism Studies*, ed. by Jean-Michel Rabaté (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Peter Brooker et al., ‘Introduction’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms*, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Ástráður Eysteinnsson, *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 8.

has been contested by a number of scholars who emphasised modernism's complex and nuanced engagement with history and tradition.<sup>4</sup>

New research in the field has increasingly questioned the understanding of modernism as an aesthetic project characterised by an internal integrity and coherence, and instead opted for the plurality of the term 'modernisms', which is better suited to embrace the heterogeneity of diverse responses to modernity. This has resulted in a major shift in the way modernism is conceptualised and how its relationship with the concept of modernity, understood as a critical project constituting a response to the condition of modernisation,<sup>5</sup> should be approached:

When 'modernity' is the prior term, 'modernism' – of whatever kind – becomes its expression, though this slightly awkward formulation is not to be understood in 'reflective' terms. If modernism expresses modernity in some sense, then this notion is to be conceived not on a base–superstructure model but on the principle of multiple interactions across social and geographical locations and of a non-linear, non-progressivist view of temporality. Modernism is not determined by a modernity that precedes it but is imbricated in it, is inseparable from the self-reflexive nature of the modern life-forms into which it is bound. Modernism is then to be seen in terms of overlapping, criss-crossing, and labile networks.<sup>6</sup>

These recent developments in the field of modernist studies have led to an unsettling of the received interpretation of the period and challenging definitional issues. Susan Friedman has rightly observed that 'in an evolving scholarly discourse, *modern*, *modernity*, and *modernism* constitute a critical Tower of Babel, a cacophony of categories

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Anne Fernald, 'Modernism and Tradition', in *Modernism*, ed. by Ástráður Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2007), pp. 157–171; and Daniel Moore, 'Questions of History', in *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms*, pp. 368–387.

<sup>5</sup> As Ástráður Eysteinnsson remarks, while there is a constant debate about how modernity and modernism should be defined, there is also general agreement 'as to the constituents of modernity to which modernism is felt to be responding', which are grouped together under the term 'modernisation' and considered to include industrialisation, technological advancement, scientific progress, urban growth and related demographic changes, mass communication, development of national states and new bureaucratic structures, democratisation, capitalism, mass social movements, and the acceleration of the pace of life. Ástráður Eysteinnsson, *The Concept of Modernism*, p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Brooker et al., 'Introduction', p. 3.

that become increasingly useless the more inconsistently they are used.<sup>7</sup> While Friedman acknowledges the numerous problems that this definitional crisis causes, she also, and more importantly, points out:

As contradictory terms resisting consensual definition, *modern*, *modernism*, and *modernity* form a fertile terrain for interrogation, providing ever more sites for examination with each new meaning spawned. As parody of rational discourse, their contradictions highlight the production of meaning possible by attention to what will not be tamed, by what refuses consistency and homogenization.<sup>8</sup>

The differences and contradictions that are foregrounded by new research in modernist studies demonstrate, Friedman argues, that ‘definitional dissonance matters’ and ‘excursions into the meanings of *modern*, *modernity*, and *modernism*’ ought to ‘begin and end in reading the specificities of these contradictions’.<sup>9</sup>

One aspect of the modernist movement that in a very conspicuous way ‘refuses consistency and homogenization’ is the issue of its relationship with religion, which this thesis aims to address. It is a question that has until now been largely evaded and have not received much critical attention. One of the reasons for this may be that it was only recently that scholars of modernism began to critique the validity of the secularisation theory. According to the standard version of this theory, the period of modernism was the time when humankind could celebrate the new freedom of thought born at the moment when institutional religion fell into decline.<sup>10</sup> Offering a seemingly unbiased account of the

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<sup>7</sup> Susan Stanford Friedman, ‘Definitional Excursions: The Meanings of Modern/Modernity/Modernism’, *Modernism/Modernity*, 8.3 (2001), 493–513 (p. 497). Various attempts at defining modernity/modernism can be found in *Modernism 1890-1930*, ed. by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, reprinted with a new preface (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991); Marjorie Perloff, ‘Modernist Studies’, in *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1992), pp. 154–78; Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); and Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, 2nd edn (London: Verso, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Friedman, p. 497.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 510.

<sup>10</sup> The decline in institutionalised religion in the twentieth century is a sociological fact, yet, as Charles Taylor points out in *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge

decline of religion, the secularisation narrative poses an inverse relationship between the modern and the religious, claiming that the inevitable advance of the former and the social processes it consists in, including the rise of individualism, rationalism, and relativism, are in a causal relationship with the disappearance of the latter.<sup>11</sup> The theory, increasingly questioned by sociologists and historians since the 1990s, has come under close scrutiny of modernist studies scholars only in recent years.<sup>12</sup> The study that set the precedent and drew attention to the high significance of research into modernism and religion was Pericles Lewis's *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* (2010).<sup>13</sup> It calls into question the way in which scholars' uncritical embrace of the secularisation thesis created a blind spot in modernist studies, and precluded comprehensive research into the interaction between religious sensibility of the modernists and their literary responses to the modern condition. As Lewis argues, the relationship between modernity and

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University Press, 1989), this fact is open to diverse interpretations. Instead of being a sign of the demise of religion, it can as well point to its individualisation. According to Taylor, the key characteristic that distinguishes the twentieth century from earlier periods is that before religion constituted 'the publicly established order of references', whereas in the twentieth century 'the metaphysics or theology comes indexed to a personal vision, or refracted through a particular sensibility' (p. 491). Thus, it should not be taken for granted that religion can be justifiably omitted from critical accounts of the period on the grounds that it had lost its cultural relevance.

<sup>11</sup> A detailed discussion of various versions of the secularisation thesis and their refutations exceeds the scope of this study. For a comprehensive account of the classical secularisation thesis and its later revised versions, see Rob Warner, *Secularization and Its Discontents* (London: Continuum, 2010). For recent critiques of this theory, see John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006); David Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). Its defence can be found in Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Steve Bruce, *Religion in The Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) and *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> A notable example of a historical study contesting the secularisation narrative is Thomas Dixon's *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). It investigates the development of the modern concept of emotion, arguing that until the late nineteenth century 'the Christian (theological) and thinly theistic (metaphysical) ways of thinking about human mental life have persisted alongside the secular and scientific' (pp. 233-234) and '[c]ommitment to science and commitment to Christianity were not mutually exclusive; there was no simple correlation between indifference or hostility to Christianity and promotion of a scientific approach to mental life' (p. 235).

<sup>13</sup> Pericles Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). See also Philip Tsang's review: 'Desecularizing Modernism: A Review of Pericles Lewis's *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 35.1 (2011), 193-195.

secularisation is by no means unequivocal, and many modernist authors seemed to be acutely aware of this:

Something has certainly happened to religious experience during the first half of the twentieth century, and insofar as it involves an imagined emptying-out of the churches, it might plausibly be called secularization. Yet, the modernists did not accept secularization as inevitable or embrace a world emptied of the sacred. They sought instead to understand religious experience anew, in the light of their own experience of modernity and of the theories of their contemporaries.<sup>14</sup>

Lewis contends that secularisation, when applied to literary scholarship in general and modernist studies in particular, is a ‘misleading word’ since ‘modernists were not the devout secularists that most critics portray’.<sup>15</sup> Instead of celebrating the liberating secularisation of the world, many of them began exploring and imagining new ways in which the sacred could be approached in what Lewis calls an ‘age of continued religious crisis’.<sup>16</sup> Examining works by Henry James, Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka, Virginia Woolf in parallel with psychological, social, and anthropological theories developed by William James, Émile Durkheim, Sigmund Freud, and Max Weber, Lewis shows how certain novels of authors who professed to be agnostic or atheist enact a search for ‘transcendent experiences’ that the scholars of the period attempted to account for within conceptual frameworks of psychology, sociology and anthropology. Lewis’s central argument is that the authors discussed ‘regard the challenges of modernity as essentially spiritual’.<sup>17</sup> The distinction that has been often drawn between the Victorian age that had to face a deep religious crisis and modernism that accepted and celebrated the secularist agenda is artificial and ‘masks important continuities’.<sup>18</sup> Not only, Lewis argues, was the crisis not

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<sup>14</sup> Lewis, p. 19.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

over by the end of the nineteenth century, but as historical research shows, at the beginning of the twentieth century a ‘reaction set in against the secularizing tendencies’ of the preceding decades, leading to a renewed interest in idealist philosophy, fascination with spiritualism and the occult, and heated theological debates between the modernising and orthodox circles in the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>19</sup> Thus, Lewis contends, questions regarding the situation of religion in modernity were certainly one of the key concerns of modernist thinkers, even though their reactions to the process of secularisation could be deeply ambivalent.

Lewis’s ground-breaking research on the relationship between modernism and religion came at a point when several other scholars began questioning the unconditional endorsement of the alleged secularism of modernism. Gregory Erickson in *The Absence of God in Modernist Literature* (2007) employs concepts developed by poststructuralist philosophers and theologians to re-read canonical modernist texts by Henry James, Marcel Proust, and Arnold Schoenberg. He argues that while their works have been read as testimonies to the death or absence of God, his reinterpretations show that ‘God did not disappear, but can be found inscribed and disguised within the difficulty and contradictory nature of many modernist works’ structures and ideologies’.<sup>20</sup> In a similar manner, Roger Luckhurst in his chapter on ‘Religion, Psychical Research, Spiritualism, and the Occult’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms* (2010) strongly contests the claim that ‘one central way of defining modernity is to emphasize its rejection of religion’, agreeing with Marina Warner’s thesis that ‘modernity did not by any means put an end to the quest for spirit’.<sup>21</sup> He points to the ways in which ‘the spirit leaked back into the grid of secular knowledge’ in the early twentieth century, and enthusiasm for scientific naturalism

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Gregory Erickson, *The Absence of God in Modernist Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Roger Luckhurst, ‘Religion, Psychical Research, Spiritualism, and the Occult’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms*, pp. 429–444 (pp. 429–430).

gradually faded away with the increased interest in spiritualism, theosophy, occultism, and revival of orthodox religion.

More recently, the revised edition of *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (2011) included a chapter on ‘Modernism and Religion’ by Lewis, who illustrates the paradigmatic shift taking place in modernist studies.<sup>22</sup> Lewis gives a penetrating critique of the established secularist paradigm of academic criticism of modernist texts that ‘tends anachronistically to read back into them a blithely secular point of view’.<sup>23</sup> He points out that ‘the unidirectional conception of modernisation as secularisation seems to dominate received understandings of the uniqueness of the “modern” age or the twentieth century, especially in literary criticism’, and argues for a revision of secularist paradigms employed by scholars of modernism.<sup>24</sup> He emphasises that putting secularisation theory into question does not negate the fact that significant cultural and intellectual changes did take place at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, yet draws attention to the importance of accounting for these complex changes in a nuanced and as historically accurate as possible manner. He shows that comprehensive historical research proves that ‘the actual direction of change in the early twentieth century was almost the reverse of what the more simplistic versions of the secularization hypothesis would suggest’, and hence he calls for extensive research informed by more refined conceptual frameworks.<sup>25</sup>

The most recent work in the field is Erik Tønning’s *Modernism and Christianity* (2014). It differs from Lewis’s study in that its specific focus is the ‘formative and continuing impact’ of Christianity on the modernist movement. As Tønning states, his aim is to defend ‘the view that any theoretical, historical or critical discussion of Modernism

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<sup>22</sup> The first edition of *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, ed. by Michael H. Levenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) did not have a single entry on religion.

<sup>23</sup> Pericles Lewis, ‘Modernism and Religion’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, 2nd edn, pp. 178–196 (p. 178).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191

that neglects or minimizes that impact is inevitably flawed'.<sup>26</sup> Just like Lewis, Tønning underscores the necessity to adopt a critical approach towards the secularisation theory as well as the importance of paying closer attention to the 'dense historical context, archival research and biographical and textual details'.<sup>27</sup> Despite Tønning's emphasis on the fact that his short study's purpose is 'to pave the way for future work', he manages to briefly discuss the Christian dimension of works by several major modernists, including James Joyce, David Jones, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, W. H. Auden, and Samuel Beckett. Himself focusing on Anglophone authors, Tønning envisions a broader perspective of future research projects that would move beyond the confines of Anglophone literatures and include insights from a variety of other disciplines, such as 'intellectual, cultural, political and scientific history, [...] theology, philosophy, psychology, anthropology and sociology'.<sup>28</sup> He argues that such interdisciplinary work, informed by 'dense contextualization, biographical information and archival study', will lead us to a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of the 'formative tensions' between Christianity and modernity that can be found at the heart of the modernist movement.<sup>29</sup>

### **Modernism and Religion: A Historical Perspective**

Tønning and Lewis emphasise the need to challenge the secularisation narrative by historicising our understanding of modernism and viewing it within a wider context of cultural, political, sociological and religious changes that took place at the turn of the century. They both draw attention to the fact that the grand narrative that equates

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<sup>26</sup> Erik Tønning, *Modernism and Christianity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

modernisation with secularisation can be turned into a more nuanced and complex approach only if it is supported with extensive historical research that sheds light on those aspects of modernism that have been marginalised by scholars who, consciously or not, endorsed the secularist perspective. The extent to which new revisionist research can challenge our interpretation of the modernist movement has been illustrated by two recent studies by the historians Peter J. Bowler and Stephen Schloesser. In their respective works, *Reconciling Science and Religion: The Debate in Early-Twentieth-Century Britain* (2001) and *Jazz Age Catholicism: Mystic Modernism in Postwar Paris, 1919–1933* (2005), they show that the application of the classical secularisation thesis to the period of modernism is more problematic than it has been realised.<sup>30</sup>

Bowler's research challenges the view that since the time when scientific naturalism that favoured empiricism and promoted a mechanical view of the world that was governed by comprehensible natural laws became a paradigm of scholarly inquiry in the nineteenth century, science gradually led to the demise of religion. Since the nineteenth-century scientific naturalism 'denied the existence of a spiritual world apart from the universe revealed by the senses', Bowler asserts, proponents of the secularisation theory have assumed it to be a yet another significant milestone in the linear process of secularisation, leading to the twentieth-century 'death of God'.<sup>31</sup> However, as Bowler proves in his close analysis of scientific and religious debates of the period, the early twentieth century, contrary to what one could expect, brought about a resurgent

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<sup>30</sup> Peter J. Bowler, *Reconciling Science and Religion: The Debate in Early-Twentieth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Stephen Schloesser, *Jazz Age Catholicism: Mystic Modernism in Postwar Paris, 1919–1933* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

<sup>31</sup> As Bowler explains: 'The claim that the advance of science necessarily bring it into conflict with established religious beliefs was advanced most energetically in the late nineteenth century by those who believed that science was the vehicle by which a new, secular view of the human situation would be established. T. H. Huxley was one advocate of this philosophy of scientific naturalism, but the metaphor of a "war" between the two areas was projected most explicitly by J. W. Draper's *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* (1874) and A. D. White's *History of the Warfare of Science and Theology* (1896). The exponents of scientific naturalism believed that conflict was inevitable because religion was wedded to traditional dogma while science offered a new route to the truth that inevitably exposed the inadequacies of past ideas. This was a war that science was bound to win because it was the only reliable source of information' (p. 10).

enthusiasm for radically different accounts of reality – ‘an explosion of interest in the nonmaterialistic ways of thinking, many of which impinged on what can legitimately be called religious ideas.’<sup>32</sup> Idealist philosophy, psychic research, spiritualism, astrology, theosophy, and revivalist religious movements were all expressions of the need to reimagine the world so as to make it more open to what could be called the supernatural or the transcendent.<sup>33</sup> These ways of comprehending the world, Bowler argues, were not necessarily considered incompatible with advances in science, and a number of scientists hospitable to non-materialistic thinking and religious intellectuals open to science engaged in lively discussions. ‘Religious feelings, especially those of a mystical character, were increasingly taken as valid guides to reality, guides that coexisted with the rational and empirical faculties used by science.’<sup>34</sup> Having analysed ‘an enormous volume’ of largely forgotten literature by early twentieth century scientists, theologians, and popular writers, Bowler puts into question the ‘old model of inevitable conflict’ between science and religion and draws attention to the ‘concerted effort to bring about a reconciliation between science and religion’.<sup>35</sup> Emphasising the interaction and exchange that took place between the two disciplines, Bowler argues for the reconsideration of the relationship between science and religion so as to make it possible to account for ‘several different ways in which science and religion can be related to each other.’<sup>36</sup>

While Bowler researched interactions between the fields of religion and science, Schloesser focused on the mutual exchanges between culture, art and religion in early-twentieth-century France. Discussing the works of the philosopher and theologian Jacques

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> For other comprehensive accounts of various forms of belief in the supernatural in the period of modernism, see Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004); and Georgina Byrne, *Modern Spiritualism and the Church of England, 1850-1939* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2010).

<sup>34</sup> Bowler, p. 13.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 3, 5.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

Maritain, the painter Georges Rouault, the novelist Georges Bernanos, and the composer Charles Tournemire, Schloesser asserts that ‘recovering the largely forgotten story of the *renouveau catholique* offers a case study of one place and time in which modernity tried to recover the wondrous – the “mystical” – that it had once eclipsed’.<sup>37</sup> Like Bowler, Schloesser draws attention to the return of interest in phenomena inexplicable by means of ‘social and psychological determinism’ advocated by scientific naturalism.<sup>38</sup> This interest could be seen in the Decadent movement promoting various forms of spiritualism and celebrating the unconscious, the indeterminate, the insane, and the hysteric and in the Catholic revival of the inter-war years that aimed to reclaim the value of transcendence. The latter, Schloesser argues, led to Catholicism coming ‘to be imagined by certain cultural and intellectual elites not only as being thoroughly compatible with “modernity,” but even more emphatically, as constituting the truest expression of “modernity”’.<sup>39</sup>

The historical research conducted by Bowler and Schloesser shows that applying the secularisation thesis to modernism creates an artificially homogenous image of the movement, and produces a skewed perspective on the relationship between religion and culture of the early twentieth century. If complex tensions and interactions between modernity and religion that were an important part of the cultural landscape of modernism are to be brought to light, more nuanced frameworks need to be employed.<sup>40</sup> Such

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<sup>37</sup> Schloesser, p. 17.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>40</sup> One such framework has been put forward by Charles Taylor in *A Catholic Modernity?*. Taylor proposes to move beyond the received dichotomies of the secular and the religious, reason and faith, science and intuition, and instead classify intellectual and spiritual worldviews according to two criteria: their affirmation (or lack thereof) of life on the one hand and transcendence on the other. At the turn of twentieth century, Taylor argues, among those who would deny transcendence, similarly to secular humanists, were also members of the Decadent movement and certain followers of Nietzsche. At the same time, however, these groups would reject the life optimism of secular humanists and envision life as a struggle, suffering, and pain. Certain members of the Decadent movement, moreover, would allow for the possibility of transcendence and exhibit interest in occultism, spiritualism, theosophy, or psychical research (that its founders considered to be a scientific inquiry into the paranormal, which makes it also defy any simple classification). The Decadents’ conviction that corruption, suffering and death are inherent parts of human life was shared by Christians, for whom it was inextricably bound with the doctrine of the Original Sin. At the same time, Christians distanced themselves from the profound pessimism of the Decadent movement, together with secular humanists’ affirming the value

approaches would make it clear that modernist culture was a scene of lively and rich intellectual exchanges in which some forms of belief in the transcendent and the supernatural were by no means as exceptional or eccentric as the secularisation theory would maintain.

### **Christian Tradition and Modernity: Poetic Responses**

If one allows for a more complex framework than that proposed by the classical secularisation theory, the Christian worldview can also reveal a number of internal tensions that proved to be of formative significance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. On the one hand, as Charles Taylor observes, certain groups of Christians displayed affinity with secular humanists and put stronger emphasis on the affirmation of life, underscoring the ancient doctrine of divine immanence – the indwelling of God in the world.<sup>41</sup> On the other end of the spectrum, there were groups that accentuated God’s transcendence and the radical separation between the human and the divine, which required believers to renounce the material world and strive towards ascetic detachment.<sup>42</sup> This tension or even paradox, present in the Christian understanding of the

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of life. *A Catholic Modernity?: Charles Taylor’s Marianist Award Lecture*, ed. by James L. Heft (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 20–29.

<sup>41</sup> Detailed contemporary treatments of religious and philosophical implications of the doctrine of immanence can be found in *Christian Mysticism and Incarnational Theology: Between Transcendence and Immanence*, ed. by Louise Nelstrop and Simon D. Podmore (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013); Leonard Lawlor, *The Implications of Immanence: Toward a New Concept of Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006); *Models of God and Alternative Ultimate Realities*, ed. by Jeanine Diller and Asa Kasher (New York: Springer, 2013); and David Brown, *God and Grace of Body: Sacrament in Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>42</sup> For comprehensive contemporary studies of religious and philosophical implications of the doctrine of transcendence, see Martin J. De Nys, *Considering Transcendence: Elements of a Philosophical Theology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); Merold Westphal, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence: On God and the Soul* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); Margaret S. Archer, Andrew Collier and Douglas V. Porpora, *Transcendence: Critical Realism and God* (London: Routledge, 2004); and John Milbank ‘Materialism and Transcendence’, in *Theology and the Political: The New Debate*, ed. by Creston Davis, John Milbank, and Slavoj Žižek (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), pp. 393–426.

relationship of God to the world, escalated at the turn of the century.<sup>43</sup> On the one hand, certain religious thinkers and theologians became increasingly open to scientific discoveries and ready to reinterpret chosen Christian doctrines in a way ‘consistent with the new understanding of nature’ – among them the most prominent were the theologians that would be dubbed Modernists in the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, those who held more orthodox views would respond with alarmed suspicion to such a rapprochement of a scientific worldview and Christian faith, considering the doctrinal sacrifices that were required for this reconciliation to come true too much of a compromise – such a view was endorsed by the proponents of neo-scholasticism in the Roman Catholic Church and Anglo-Catholicism in the Church of England. The tension between the two groups brought about the so-called Modernist crisis in the Roman Catholic Church and intense debates in the Church of England. While the first two decades of the twentieth century were a time when the possibility of reaching a new synthesis between religion and science advocated by Modernist theologians seemed possible, the resurgence of a more orthodox attitude after World War I soon undermined the fragile reconciliation.<sup>45</sup>

This thesis traces the key issues of these largely forgotten theological debates to argue that they constitute an important context for reading modernist literature. Showing how the poetry of three modernist authors – Rainer Maria Rilke, T. S. Eliot, and Józef Wittlin – engaged with contemporary religious controversies, I aim to demonstrate the significance of the numerous interactions and exchanges between the literature and theology of the period. The historical recovery of the theological context from which cultural modernism emerged – and it is worth noting that at the beginning of the twentieth century the term ‘modernism’ itself was employed primarily in reference to the theological

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<sup>43</sup> A comprehensive discussion of this escalation and theological controversies in which it resulted can be found in chapter 1, section 2: ‘The “New Wine” of Modernism and the “Old Scholastic Bottles”’.

<sup>44</sup> Bowler, p. 3.

<sup>45</sup> Bowler, p. 407.

controversy in the Roman Catholic Church – will foreground the tensions present in the religious landscape of the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. I suggest that these tensions to a great extent informed the writings of many modernist authors and thinkers in a number of European countries, including Great Britain, France, Italy, Austro-Hungary, and Poland. The limited scope of this project does not allow me to discuss authors from each of these countries; hence, I have restricted my focus to three poets: the Austrian-Czech Rilke, the Anglo-American Eliot, and the Polish-Jewish Wittlin. I argue that these poets use in their writings certain distinct elements of Christian tradition in order to explore, question, and reclaim the relevance of Christianity for modernity. Their poetic experimentation, on the one hand, parallels the pursuits of many theologians of the period and, on the other, reflects their own spiritual and intellectual development.

In placing three poets who wrote in three different languages and literary traditions side by side, I do not intend to obliterate the differences between various European modernisms nor the three Christian traditions that inspired their writings.<sup>46</sup> My chapters emphasise the specificity and heterogeneity of each poet's spiritual journey: from Roman Catholicism to Russian Orthodoxy (Rilke), from Unitarianism to Anglo-Catholicism (Eliot), and from Judaism to Roman Catholicism (Wittlin). By adopting such a broad scope for my project, I aim to draw attention to the fact that the forgotten theological background of modernism was not limited to any one European state nor any single Christian

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<sup>46</sup> Relations between Rilke's and Eliot's works have been discussed before. Ian Cooper examined Rilke's and Eliot's poetic treatment of the relationship between redemption and modernity in *The Near and Distant God: Poetry, Idealism and Religious Thought from Hölderlin to Eliot* (London: Legenda, 2008), pp. 121–167. R. W. Sheppard and H. P. Rickman pointed out parallels between Rilke's treatment of the themes of salvation and poetic vocation in *Duino Elegies* and Eliot's conceptualisation of these topics in *Four Quartets*; see H. P. Rickman, 'Poetry and the Ephemeral: Rilke's and Eliot's Conceptions of the Poet's Task', *German Life and Letters*, 12.3 (1959), 174–185; and R. W. Sheppard, 'Rilke's *Duineser Elegien*: A Critical Appreciation in the Light of Eliot's *Four Quartets*', *German Life and Letters*, 20.3 (1967), 205–218. Parallels between Rilke's and Wittlin's understanding of poetic and religious hermeneutics have been explored by Katarzyna Szewczyk-Haake in 'Co się z nami stanie albo o co Józef Wittlin mógłby zapytać Rainera M. Rilkego' [What Will Come of Us, or What Could Józef Wittlin Ask Rainer M. Rilke About], *Teksty Drugie* [Second Texts], 1/2 (2012), 308–318.

denomination. A comparative framework will also make it possible to challenge what Lewis has described as ‘an increasingly narrow “Anglo-American” view of modernism, focusing almost exclusively on literature written in English’, and respond to Mark Wollaeger’s appeal to ‘open a comparative space within Anglophone scholarship for discussion of a wide range of foreign language productions’.<sup>47</sup> It has been well-known that modernism was an inherently international movement,<sup>48</sup> and since the act of crossing the boundaries – including the boundaries of languages and national literatures – constituted an important defining feature of the period, adopting a comparative research framework is the most appropriate way to respond to modernism’s ‘challenge to leave behind national boundaries and to keep searching beyond them’.<sup>49</sup>

The first chapter, ‘Reconciling Christianity and Modernity: A Theological History of Modernism’, establishes the historical context for the following chapters, focusing on the key issues of the theological debates that spread around Europe at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. The chapter shows how the circulation of letters, publications, and translations contributed to a robust and extensive exchange of thoughts and ideas among clergy, lay theologians, philosophers, and authors living and writing in different places in Europe. It illustrates how questions such as the relationship between immanence and transcendence, the historical development of Christian dogmas and doctrines, and the subjectivity of religious experience were discussed by religious thinkers of different denominations and languages, who later came to be known as Modernists. In this and other chapters, for the sake of clarity, I capitalise

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<sup>47</sup> Pericles Lewis, ‘Introduction’, in *The Cambridge Companion to European Modernism*, ed. by Pericles Lewis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 1–9 (p. 1). Mark A. Wollaeger, ‘Introduction’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, pp. 3–22 (p. 3).

<sup>48</sup> See Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, ‘The Name and Nature of Modernism’, in *Modernism 1890-1930*, pp. 19–55.

<sup>49</sup> Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 11.

the term 'Modernism' when it is used in a strictly theological sense, and spell it with lower case when referring to the cultural, literary and aesthetic movement.

Chapter two, 'The Ripening Dark God of Modernity', discusses Rilke's fascination with the theology of the Orthodox icon that informs his poetic cycle 'The Book of Monastic Life', which I read as a modern version of a traditional monastic prayer book. The poems comprising this cycle explore the meaning of ancient iconography for a contemporary believer, probing into the manner in which the traditional form of Eastern Orthodox worship allows for individual subjectivity. Chapter three, "'Raid[s] on the absolute": Dogmatic Tradition and Mystical Experience in T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Criticism', traces Eliot's search for a hermeneutic framework that would enable a modern thinker to comprehend the meaning of religious experience. I show how this search is reflected in Eliot's essays and poems in which he explores the relationship between received dogma and subjective religious experience. The length of this chapter reflects Eliot's sustained interest in theology and its relation to literature and culture in general. Chapter four, 'Reinventing Hagiography: The Ideal of Modern Sainthood in Józef Wittlin's Poetry', discusses Wittlin's engagement with the ancient literary genre of saints' lives. I suggest that Wittlin's fascination with Saint Francis of Assisi, who frequently recurs both in his poetry and prose writings, promotes a model of Christian sainthood that can be read as both traditional and modern. Francis in Wittlin's works embodies Christian renunciation or de-centering of the self that is envisaged as an act entailing radical empathy with and responsibility for one's neighbour, whom Wittlin conceives of as not only another human being, but any living creature.

I argue that all three poets – Rilke with his exploration of the darkness of the Orthodox God, Eliot with his preoccupation with the concept of religious hermeneutics, and Wittlin with his ideal of radical empathy with one's neighbour – seek to relate to medieval Christian traditions and test their relevance for modernity. The early twentieth

century perception of the medieval was ambivalent and embraced two competing visions of the Middle Ages: as a period that gave rise to a number of spiritual revivals and created countless mystics, and as a time when Thomas Aquinas conceived the scholastic method and thus laid ground for what he considered a systematic and rational study of God. I aim to show how Rilke, Eliot, and Wittlin – as well as Modernist and neo-scholastic theologians – negotiated between these two different visions of the medieval, with Rilke and Wittlin inclined to endorse the mystical traditions of the Middle Ages, and Eliot drawn to the perceived objectivity of Thomism. My discussion of the various ways in which these three poets re-imagined modern Christianity in relation to its medieval roots is intended as a response to Topping's and Lewis's call for more historically oriented research aimed at uncovering the forgotten religious dimension of modernism. It is my hope that it will help to re-establish the place of theology within modernist studies.

## Chapter 1

### Reconciling Christianity and Modernity:

#### A Theological History of Modernism

‘Were one to attempt the task of collecting together all the errors that have been broached against the faith and to concentrate the sap and substance of them all into one, he could not better succeed than the Modernists have done. Nay, they have done more than this, for, as we have already intimated, their system means the destruction not of the Catholic religion alone but of all religion.’

Pope Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, 1907<sup>1</sup>

‘Modernism is a convenient missile to hurl at the head of someone whose opinion you do not like. But Modernism is only the altogether praiseworthy attempt on the part of a group of thinkers to present Christian truth in terms of modern knowledge. We do not to-day travel by coach, or wear jerkins, or speak the language of Chaucer, or believe that the earth is the centre of the solar system. Why in matters theological should we be forced to think in terms of bygone centuries? Woe betide the Church that shuts its eyes to God’s gift of new knowledge!’

Canon Vernon Storr, 1920s<sup>2</sup>

While at the end of the nineteenth century the term ‘modernism’ was used in a variety of cultural contexts, at the beginning of the twentieth it would be employed primarily in theological discourse. However, the relationship between the various historical meanings of ‘modernism’ – on the one hand, theological and religious, on the other, cultural and aesthetic – has not yet been sufficiently explored.<sup>3</sup> This chapter aims to shed light on the

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Pius X, ‘Pascendi dominici gregis’, in *The Papal Encyclicals*, ed. by Claudia Carlen, 5 vols (Washington, DC: McGrath, 1981), III: 1903–1939, pp. 71–98 (p. 89, § 39).

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Henry D. A. Major, *English Modernism: Its Origin, Methods, Aims* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927), pp. 41–42.

<sup>3</sup> The relation between literary modernism and theological Modernism has been briefly addressed in the following papers: Finn Fordham, ‘Between Theological and Cultural Modernism: The Vatican’s Oath against Modernism, September 1910’, *Literature & History*, 22.1 (2013), 8–24; Malcolm Bull, ‘Who Was the First to Make a Pact with the Devil?’, *London Review of Books*, 14 May 1992, pp. 22–23; Gary Lease, ‘Modernism and “Modernism”: Christianity as Product of Its Culture’, *Journal for the Study of*

spaces of interaction and exchange between theological and literary modernisms in the hope that this will broaden the scope of modernist studies by highlighting the often neglected religious landscape of the period.

Modernist aesthetics is often defined through the dialectic between modernists' focus on individual subjective experience and their drive towards objectivism, which is understood to be one of the core tensions in the modernist paradigm. As Eysteinnsson explains:

On the one hand, it seems that modernism is built on highly subjectivist premises: by directing its attention so predominantly toward individual or subjective experience, it elevates the ego in proportion to a diminishing awareness of objective or coherent outside reality. It is customary to point to the pre-eminence of such subjectivist poetics in expressionist and surrealist literature, and more specifically in certain techniques, such as manipulation of 'centers of consciousness' or the use of 'stream of consciousness' in modern fiction. On the other hand, modernism is often held to draw its legitimacy primarily from writing based on highly antisubjectivist or impersonal poetics.<sup>4</sup>

Modernists questioned both the realist mode of representation that was based on the premise that there exists an objective reality that can be mimetically portrayed in art and literature, and the traditional understanding of consciousness as a self-contained entity. The subject-object relationship was revisited by both contemporary psychology and philosophy, and literature and visual arts. While William James's work put into question the received definition of consciousness, suggesting that it may be a dynamic entity that comes into being through experiential relations, modernist authors' experimental writings

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*Religion*, 1 (1988), 3–23; Una M. Cadegan, 'Modernisms Literary and Theological', *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 20.3 (2002), 97–110, (repr. in a revised form in Una M. Cadegan, *All Good Books Are Catholic Books: Print Culture, Censorship, and Modernity in Twentieth-Century America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), pp. 47–63). See also Tønning, chapter 2: 'Catholic Modernisms: James Joyce and David Jones', pp. 25–58. I am grateful to Finn Fordham and Erik Tønning for sending me their work in advance of publication.

<sup>4</sup> Eysteinnsson, *The Concept of Modernism*, p. 27.

extensively explored those relations through the techniques of interior monologue, stream of consciousness, and multiple-perspective narration.<sup>5</sup>

The importance of turn-of-the-century philosophical and psychological debates on the topic of consciousness and subjectivity has been widely discussed by modernist scholars; however, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the fact that scholarly, artistic, and literary explorations of the boundary between the subjective and the objective were paralleled by similar discussions in the circles of contemporary theologians and religious thinkers.<sup>6</sup> The influence of these theological debates was immense; they ultimately led to the so-called Modernist crisis in the Roman Catholic Church and to similar controversies in other Christian churches. A central issue that these debates addressed was the challenge posed to the received neo-scholastic and positivist version of Christian doctrine by a more individually oriented, experiential understanding of Christianity proposed by such Modernist theologians as George Tyrrell, Alfred Loisy, Maurice Blondel, Friedrich von Hügel, and Henri Bremond. They focused on the questions concerning individual religious experience, inner conscience, and mystical phenomena, which can be seen as having their literary parallels in the turn towards the subjective among literary modernists, for instance, James Joyce's notion of epiphany or Virginia Woolf's moments of vision.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, William James, 'Does "Consciousness" Exist?', *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods*, 1 (1904), 477–491. Peter Gay in *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy, from Baudelaire to Beckett and Beyond* (London: William Heinemann, 2007) observes that the modernist novel was to a large extent 'an exercise in subjectivity', yet its originality lay 'not so much in its discovery of the mental province as in re-mapping its territory; its experimental techniques were designed to dig deeper – far deeper – than tradition-bound novelists had ever done. The novel in modernist hands became increasingly a novel of consciousness' (pp. 189–190).

<sup>6</sup> For a thorough examination of the relation between psychology and literature and the arts at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, see Judith Ryan, *The Vanishing Subject: Early Psychology and Literary Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); George M. Johnson, *Dynamic Psychology in Modernist British Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); and *The Mind of Modernism: Medicine, Psychology, and the Cultural Arts in Europe and America, 1880–1940*, ed. by Mark S. Micale (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> See John McGowan, 'From Pater to Wilde to Joyce: Modernist Epiphany and the Soulful Self', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 32.3 (1990), 417–445; *Moments of Moment: Aspects of the Literary Epiphany*, ed. by Wim Tigges (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), esp. chapters 11–17; and Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, pp. 1–51.

Sigmund Freud, William James, and Henri Bergson are often quoted as major intellectuals whose works stimulated modernist writers' interest in the dynamics of the relationship between consciousness and the unconscious, the self and its others, the subjective and objective reality. However, what has rarely been drawn attention to is the fact that one of the principal preoccupations of James and Bergson was finding a modern way of conceptualising the question of religious experience. Both James and Bergson remained in close correspondence with a number of Modernist theologians, and influenced and were influenced by their works. The attempts of the thinkers associated with theological Modernism to develop a new Christian apologetics that would account for the individual dimension of faith and its relationship to the Christian tradition, as this thesis argues, were also immediately relevant to a number of modernist authors, including Rilke, Eliot, and Wittlin, who explored the meaning and place of Christian religion in modernity.

In order to adequately demonstrate the strong connection between cultural modernism and theological Modernism, this chapter traces the developments in Christian thought that culminated in the so-called Modernist crisis in the Roman Catholic Church; it discusses the international and interdenominational nature of the ensuing Modernist controversies; and it asserts their central presence in the print culture of the period. Furthermore, it identifies continuities and discontinuities between the early-twentieth-century theological debates and the spiritual revival that took place during and immediately after World War I. Finally, it provides examples of literary and aesthetic debates, and literary works that explicitly addressed the issues discussed in theological circles. Endorsing Fordham's proposition that if 'cultural modernism is seen through the lens of theological modernism, new cracks begin to appear in the former; and old cracks that we have often sensed are there, suddenly have a much clearer explanation', this chapter aims to illuminate the spaces of encounter between theological and literary

modernisms.<sup>8</sup> This historically focused discussion sets the context for the following chapters, which demonstrate the value of focused, historically rooted readings of modernist works, taking poems by Rilke, Eliot, and Wittlin as examples. Their poems, I argue, can be read as creative attempts to reconceptualise the relationship between Christian tradition and the experience of modernity, which was also at the heart of contemporary theological debates.

### **Religious Experience in Early-Twentieth-Century Philosophy: William James and Henri Bergson**

Modernist theologians and religious thinkers followed the work of early-twentieth-century philosophers and psychologists analysing the subject of religious experience, mystical states and other related phenomena, paying particular attention to James's and Bergson's studies. The anti-rationalist strain of contemporary philosophy, with its emphasis on the role of intuition as a corrective to intelligence, and the dynamic and pragmatic nature of lived values, is reflected in Modernist theologians' attempts to reimagine Christianity as a dynamic and living system undergoing constant evolution. They rejected many *a priori* statements endorsed by neo-scholastic metaphysics and attempted to reconsider the notion of faith so as to shed more light on its inner dimension.

Among the works that had a major influence on Modernist theologians was William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, delivered as a series of lectures at the University of Edinburgh in 1901–1902.<sup>9</sup> In this seminal study, James asserted that

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<sup>8</sup> Fordham, p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed discussion of James's approach to religion, see Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 261–307.

research into religion should consist primarily in the investigation of individual religious experience. He offered a wide range of case studies of intense religious experiences, which, he argued, could be fruitfully analysed by psychologists. Keenly interested in mysticism, James developed a theory according to which the foundations of religious experience are located in the subconscious. He refrained, however, from defining the limits of the subconscious, leaving open the question of the ultimate origin of religious experience. He disapproved of the rationalistic and materialistic attempts to explain religion away by means of the methods of anthropology and sociology, and dismissed the contemporary practice of ‘criticising the religious emotions by showing a connection between them and the sexual life’.<sup>10</sup> James argued that contemporary science tended to favour such a reductive view of religion because it had excluded the personal point of view and chose to study only objective realities that could be properly measured. This, to James, appeared ‘shallow’, since, as he maintained, ‘so long as we deal with the cosmic and the general, we deal only with the symbols of reality, but as soon as we deal with private and personal phenomena as such, we deal with realities in the completest sense of the term.’<sup>11</sup>

According to James, the world of experience consists both in the objective and subjective parts. In the objective dimension of experience, ‘the cosmic objects, so far as the experience yields them, are but ideal pictures of something whose existence we do not inwardly possess but only point at outwardly,’ yet, James claims, ‘the inner state is our very experience itself; its reality and that of our experience are one.’<sup>12</sup> Individual experience, James points out, ‘may be sneered at as unscientific’; nevertheless, ‘it is the one thing that fills up the measure of our concrete actuality’.<sup>13</sup> Having thus reclaimed the

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<sup>10</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1902), p. 10. James concludes: ‘There is a notion in the air about us that religion is probably only an anachronism, a case of “survival,” an atavistic relapse into a mode of thought which humanity in its more enlightened examples has outgrown; and this notion our religious anthropologists at present do little to counteract’ (p. 490).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 498.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 499.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 499.

value of subjective experience, which included religious experience, James analysed its place in institutionalised religions. He drew attention to the ambivalence of the term ‘religion’, insisting on the distinction between religion as an ‘individual personal function’ and religion as an ‘institutional, corporate, or tribal product’.<sup>14</sup> He considered these two aspects of religion related in a historical manner. As he explained:

A survey of history shows us that, as a rule, religious geniuses attract disciples, and produce groups of sympathizers. When these groups get strong enough to ‘organize’ themselves, they become ecclesiastical institutions with corporate ambitions of their own. The spirit of politics and the lust of dogmatic rule are then apt to enter and to contaminate the originally innocent thing; so that when we hear the word ‘religion’ nowadays, we think inevitably of some ‘church’ or other; and to some persons the word ‘church’ suggests so much hypocrisy and tyranny and meanness and tenacity of superstition that in a wholesale undiscerning way they glory in saying that they are ‘down’ on religion altogether.<sup>15</sup>

Hence, while James re-evaluates the meaning of personal religious experience, he views institutionalised religion as derivative, and considers churches and religious communities of secondary importance. They exist to communicate and transmit knowledge of individuals’ religious experiences, which with time is likely to become petrified into doctrinal statements and lose its original meaning. Thus, while refuting materialistic accounts of religion, James also distances himself from its ecclesiastical interpretations. In fact, he goes on to argue that rationalistic positivism present in Roman Catholic and Protestant systematic theologies does more harm than good to religion, attempting to circumscribe it in formulae long rendered meaningless.<sup>16</sup> The fact that theology ‘assumes

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 334.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 334–335.

<sup>16</sup> Scholastic manuals that James refers to include both the Catholic companions by Albert Stöckl (*Lehrbuch der Philosophie* [Textbook of Philosophy], 1881 edition) and Bernard Boedder (*Natural Theology*, 1891 edition) and the Protestant handbooks by Charles Hodge (*Systematic Theology*, 1873 edition) and A. H. Strong (*Systematic Theology*, 1896 edition). James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 437, n. 1.

to construct religious objects out of the resources of logical reason alone, or of logical reason drawing rigorous inference from non-subjective facts’, and that it excludes the subjective viewpoint meant for James that it breeds ‘a disdain for merely possible or probable truth’.<sup>17</sup> In this manner, he argues, ‘[f]eeling valid only for the individual is pitted against reason valid universally’.<sup>18</sup> By following this logic, James asserts, theology undermines its own validity. If theological arguments are grounded in ‘pure reason’, they should have a universal appeal, and yet ‘idealists since Kant have felt entitled either to scout or to neglect them’.<sup>19</sup> This, James observes, shows these arguments’ weakness and proves that ‘they are not solid enough to serve as religion’s all-sufficient foundation’.<sup>20</sup> James is convinced that the scholastic system cannot be the basis of a modern Christian apologetics:

What keeps religion going is something else than abstract definitions and systems of concatenated adjectives, and something different from faculties of theology and their professors. All these things are after-effects, secondary accretions upon those phenomena of vital conversation with the unseen divine, [...] renewing themselves *in saecula saeculorum* in the lives of humble private men. So much for the metaphysical attributes of God! From the point of view of practical religion, the metaphysical monster which they offer to our worship is an absolutely worthless invention of the scholarly mind. [...] We must therefore, I think, bid a definitive good-bye to dogmatic theology. In all sincerity our faith must do without that warrant.<sup>21</sup>

While Modernist theologians would not endorse all of James’s arguments, they were nevertheless largely enthusiastic about his work and frequently cited him in their own papers. In a 1909 letter of appreciation that Friedrich von Hügel, a leading figure

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 433–434.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 435.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 437.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 447–448.

among British Modernists, sent to James, he wrote: 'In the *Varieties* I have either found the first expression for what I already thought, or have been made to see where before I had only fog.'<sup>22</sup>

In 1907, five years after *The Varieties of Religious Experience* was published, and the same year when the *Pascendi* encyclical condemning the theological movement of Modernism was issued, Bergson published his *L'Évolution créatrice* (*Creative Evolution*). It soon became an international success and was translated into Russian (1909), English (1911), German (1912), Spanish (1912), Polish (1913), Danish (1915), and Czech (1919).<sup>23</sup> Bergson's contribution to reclaiming the value of scholarly enquiry into religious experience and non-rational cognition proved to be of key significance for Modernist theologians. *Creative Evolution* was Bergson's attempt at reinterpreting Darwin's deterministic theory of evolution so as to reclaim the value of creative, non-rational aspects of life. It greatly appealed to Modernist theologians, and effectively came to be considered dangerous by the Vatican; in 1914 it was placed on the Index of Prohibited Books.<sup>24</sup> One of the most powerful arguments that Bergson makes in this work is that reason, as well as the knowledge produced by it, constitute only one aspect of life, and there are phenomena whose experiential dimension eludes rational enquiry. Among these phenomena Bergson places experiences of spiritual nature. In this way, 'religious and metaphysical mysteries, which science had seemingly killed off', in Bergson's work 'reappeared in "respectable"

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<sup>22</sup> James Luther Adams, 'Letter from Baron Friedrich von Hügel to William James', *Downside Review*, 98 (1980), 214–236 (p. 229).

<sup>23</sup> *Tvorcheskaia evoliutsia*, trans. by M. Bulgakov (Moscow: Tovarishchestvo tipografii A. I. Mamontova, 1909); *Creative Evolution*, trans. by Arthur Mitchell (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1911); *Schöpferische Entwicklung*, trans. by Gertrud Kantorowicz (Jena: Diederichs, 1912); *La evolución creadora*, trans. by Carlos Malagarriga (Madrid: Renacimiento, 1912); *Ewolucya twórcza*, trans. by Floryan Znaniecki (Warsaw: Towarzystwo Literatów i Dziennikarzy Polskich, 1913); *Den skabende udvikling*, trans. by Knud Ferlov (Copenhagen: G.E.C. Gad, 1915); *Vývoj tvořivý*, trans. by Ferdinand Pelikán and František Žákavec (Prague: Jan Laichter, 1919). All quotations are from the English edition cited above.

<sup>24</sup> On Bergson and the Modernist crisis, see Harvey Hill, 'Henri Bergson and Alfred Loisy: On Mysticism and the Religious Life', in *Modernists and Mystics*, ed. by C. J. T. Talar (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), pp. 104–136.

guise'.<sup>25</sup> James hailed Bergson's achievement, observing that Bergson 'has killed intellectualism definitively and without hope of recovery'.<sup>26</sup>

*Creative Evolution* opens with a bold statement that 'our thought, in its purely logical form, is incapable of presenting the true nature of life'.<sup>27</sup> Bergson begins with a premise that it is vain to 'force the living into this or that one of our moulds. All the moulds crack. They are too narrow, above all too rigid, for what we try to put into them'.<sup>28</sup> Human intellect works with static ideas that, according to Bergson, cannot reflect the dynamism of life. It is only in action that 'an intellect [...] feeling its object so as to get its mobile impression at every instant, is an intellect that touches something of the absolute'.<sup>29</sup> Bergson's aim is to account for moments of action and experience in which it is possible to transcend the stasis of ideas and move beyond 'conceptual and logical thought' towards 'a vague nebulosity' in which 'reside certain powers that are complementary to understanding', yet of which 'we have only an indistinct feeling'.<sup>30</sup> Bergson calls these powers instinct and intuition. He defines the former as 'sympathy' that is turned 'towards life', in contradistinction to 'intelligence' turned 'towards inert matter'.<sup>31</sup> Intuition he understands as 'instinct that has become disinterested, self-conscious, and capable of reflecting upon its object and of enlarging it indefinitely'.<sup>32</sup> According to him, Darwin's theory of evolution is too deterministic and mechanical, failing to account for what Bergson identifies as the creative impulse in life. Bergson argues for the recognition of the

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<sup>25</sup> Peter Watson, *A Terrible Beauty: The People and Ideas that Shaped the Modern Mind: A History* (London: Phoenix, 2001), p. 67.

<sup>26</sup> William James, *A Pluralistic Universe: Hibbert lectures at Manchester College on the Present Situation in Philosophy* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909), p. 215. James was planning to write a preface to the English translation of *L'Évolution créatrice*, which he did not manage to do due to his untimely death. See also Frédéric Worms, 'James and Bergson: Reciprocal Readings', trans. John J. Conley, in *The Reception of Pragmatism in France and the Rise of Roman Catholic Modernism, 1890–1914*, ed. by David G. Schultenover (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), pp. 76–92.

<sup>27</sup> Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, p. ix.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. x.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xi.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xii–xiii.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

key importance of intuition, which ‘by the sympathetic communication which it establishes between us and the rest of the living, by the expansion of our consciousness which it brings about, [...] introduces us into life’s own domain, which is reciprocal interpenetration, endlessly continued creation’.<sup>33</sup>

Bergson’s distinction between intelligence and intuition had profound implications for his interpretation of the role and method of epistemology. He observed that in Western philosophy epistemology had traditionally been centred on the faculty of intellect, and it effectively failed to address the question of knowledge acquired through intuition. Bergson argued: ‘if intelligence is charged with matter and instinct with life, we must squeeze them both in order to get the double essence from them’.<sup>34</sup> While reasoning tends to ‘shut us up in the circle of the given’, action issuing from intuition ‘breaks the circle’.<sup>35</sup> It was a new challenge to modern philosophy, Bergson maintained, to account for the work of intuition and the vital role it played in human life in general, and in its spiritual dimension in particular. Reclaiming the scholarly value of philosophical exploration of spiritual life, Bergson asserted:

The great error of the doctrines on the spirit has been the idea that by isolating the spiritual life from all the rest, by suspending it in space as high as possible above the earth, they were placing it beyond attack, as if they were not thereby simply exposing it to be taken as an effect of mirage!<sup>36</sup>

This error had been committed, Bergson claimed, not only by philosophy of religion, but also by dogmatic theology. Bergson’s critique of the latter was similar to James’s. He argued that it was grounded on a set of *a priori* statements and refused to take a holistic view of life.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 177–178.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 178.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 192.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 268.

Thus, while both Bergson and James reintroduced the question of religious experience into early-twentieth-century scholarship, they simultaneously disconnected it from the traditional discourse of theology, which in their view was anachronistic and irrelevant to their explorations. Bergson's and James's emphasis on inner experience and intuition as key characteristics of religious life corresponded to a broader trend emerging in the scholarship of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The turn of the century saw an unprecedented amount of scholarly attention devoted to the irrational or supra-rational dimensions of religion, which sparked a revival of interest in mysticism and mystical experience, and led to what Leigh Eric Schmidt has called a substantial 'remapping of mysticism'.<sup>37</sup>

### **Mystical Revival in the Twentieth Century**

At the beginning of the twentieth century, mysticism was reconceptualised as a high form of spirituality, present in a variety of religions, including Christianity, Hinduism, and Sufism. This marked a radical shift from the nineteenth-century perception of mysticism. The eighth edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* published in 1858 defined mysticism as a 'form of error, [...] which mistakes the operations of a merely human faculty for a Divine manifestation'.<sup>38</sup> The definition included in the eleventh edition, which was published in 1911, shows a fundamental change of attitude. It refers to mysticism as 'a phase of thought,

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<sup>37</sup> Leigh Eric Schmidt, 'The Making of Modern "Mysticism"', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 71.2 (2003), 273–302 (p. 282). The term 'mysticism', as Schmidt explains, did not exist until the early eighteenth century; the 'prevailing classification instead was "mystical theology," and it signified a specific devotional branch within Christian divinity' (p. 276). In the Enlightenment, mysticism became 'a term charged with the reproaches of misplaced sexuality, unintelligibility, pretension, and reason-be-damned extravagance' and was considered 'one more excremental waste in the making of an enlightened, reasonable religion' (p. 279). For a cultural history of mysticism in Europe, see Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions*; and Cristina Mazzoni, *Saint Hysteria: Neurosis, Mysticism, and Gender in European Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Schmidt, p. 282.

or rather perhaps of feeling, which [...] appears in connexion with the endeavour of the human mind to grasp the divine essence or the ultimate reality of things, and to enjoy the blessedness of actual communion with the Highest'.<sup>39</sup> Such an understanding of mysticism, prevalent, for instance, in James's study, tended to interpret mysticism as a 'global species of religious experience' and collate together numerous types of mysticism of various historical and geographical provenance, including, as Schmidt enumerates, 'Oriental mysticism, Neo-Platonic mysticism, Greek mysticism, German mysticism, Persian mysticism, Spanish mysticism, and French Quietism'.<sup>40</sup> This opening up of the category of the mystical and the expansion of its uses was something of which contemporary intellectuals were much aware. In 1929, the historian and literary critic Mario Praz complained in the pages of the *Criterion*:

How many things that ill-starred word 'mystic' is forced to cover! [...] If things continue at this rate, you will see very soon the word 'mystic' losing caste, and you will not be surprised in finding it some day hobnobbing with lemans, courtesans, banditti, and similar words debased from their original meanings. Do you not think that it would be rather wise to start a Society for Protecting Words, as somebody has suggested? A penalty not exceeding five pounds should be enforced every time the word 'mystic' is improperly used.<sup>41</sup>

The opening and universalisation of the category of mysticism created anxiety about its 'proper' and 'improper' use, but also, as Schmidt asserts, made it possible:

to negotiate the intensification of religious diversity and to see it not as a threat to the solidity of Christian identity but as an opportunity for self-exploration and cross-cultural understanding. The expansion of mysticism as a category, however naïve about an underlying sameness and ecumenical harmony, was a means of

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<sup>39</sup> Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison, 'Mysticism', in *Encyclopaedia Britannica: A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, Literature and General Information*, ed. by Hugh Chrisholm, 11th edn, 29 vols (Cambridge: [Cambridge] University Press, 1910–1911), XIX (1911), pp. 123–128 (p. 123).

<sup>40</sup> Schmidt, pp. 282–283.

<sup>41</sup> Mario Praz, 'Mysticism or Advocatus Diaboli', *The Criterion*, 8.32 (April 1929), 460–479 (p. 479).

interreligious engagement – a sympathetic meeting point in an increasingly global encounter of religions.<sup>42</sup>

The modern construction of the category of mysticism created a meeting point not only for interreligious encounters, but also for a dialogue between religion and science.

This possibility was recognised and explored by a number of Catholic Modernists who attempted to construe a new Christian apologetics. While they would not universalise mystical experience, choosing to focus specifically on the Christian mystical tradition (and usually trying to maintain a distinction between ‘true’ and ‘false’ mysticism), they referenced contemporary developments in psychology and had contact with a number of scholars working in the field. The turn of the century saw a large number of studies of lives of mystics belonging both to Catholic and Protestant traditions, with the most popular being Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich, Meister Eckhart, Bernard of Clairvoux, Bonaventura, Catherine of Genoa, John of the Cross, Theresa of Avila, Jacob Boehme, Martin Luther, John Wesley, William Law and George Fox. Texts written by mystics were translated into different languages and reprinted on a large scale. Simultaneously, more general studies of mysticism written from a theological perspective, yet incorporating psychological insights started to appear across Europe.<sup>43</sup> Most of these studies challenged the rationalistic understanding of religion that was prevalent both in contemporary scientific materialism and in the Vatican-approved manuals of scholastic theology. The

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<sup>42</sup> Schmidt, pp. 289–290. Schmidt does acknowledge that while works by James and other scholars could be read as partly an ‘Orientalist strategy of appropriation’, he emphasises the fact that the modern construction of mysticism was also a hospitable invitation to ‘open up dialogic possibilities across cultures and traditions’ (p. 290).

<sup>43</sup> The most influential among them were Augustin Poulain’s *Des grâces d’oraison: traité de théologie mystique* (*The Graces of Interior Prayer: A Treatise on Mystical Theology*, 1901, Eng. trans. 1910), Auguste Sautreuil’s *L’État mystique, sa nature, ses phases* (*The Mystical State: Its Nature and Phases*, 1902, Eng. trans. 1924), Henri Bremond’s *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France* (*Literary History of Religious Thought in France*, 1916–1933, Eng. trans. 1928–1936), William Ralph Inge’s *Christian Mysticism* (1899) and *Studies in English Mystics* (1907), Friedrich von Hügel’s *The Mystical Element of Religion* (1908), Evelyn Underhill’s *Mysticism* (1911), and *The Mystics of the Church* (1925), and Cuthbert Butler’s *Western Mysticism* (1922). See Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 3 vols (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), III: *The Ecumenical Century, 1900 to the Present*, pp. 134–150.

new work on mysticism offered ‘an antipositivist, antimaterialist tool’ that could be used as ‘an intellectual shield’ not only against positivist naturalism, but also against mainstream neo-scholasticism of Catholic theology.<sup>44</sup> The notion of mystical experience was employed to prove that certain features that are at the heart of Christianity had necessarily escaped scientific and scholastic accounts of religion. In one of his letters, George Tyrrell, a key British Modernist, describes the attitude that the mystical revival tried to challenge:

One hears priests and even religious speak with a superior contempt of ‘mysticism’; without any attempt to discriminate between false and true; and sweeping away as illusions every working of the Holy Ghost that does not commend itself to ‘common-sense’. It is in the face of this Philistinism that I like to maintain the thesis that no one can love God truly and well who (as I now put it) has not the elements of mysticism, if he be not a mystic.<sup>45</sup>

For many Modernist thinkers mysticism formed part of the ordinary devotional life of the Christian believer. Von Hügel wrote about the three important elements of Christian religion: the historical and institutional element, the philosophical and intellectual element, and the intuitive and mystical element.<sup>46</sup> Henri Bremond, an influential French Modernist, asserted that ‘it is not possible to ignore the mystics without disowning one’s own self’.<sup>47</sup> Maurice Blondel, another prominent thinker among French Modernists, called ‘mystical’ the knowledge that, ‘though it may seem nocturnal, is no less an extension of thought all the way to its subterranean source from which overflows

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<sup>44</sup> Schmidt, p. 288.

<sup>45</sup> George Tyrrell, ‘Letter to V., 25 November 1897’, in *George Tyrrell’s Letters*, ed. by M. D. Petre (London: Unwin, 1920), pp. 38–40 (p. 40).

<sup>46</sup> Friedrich von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion: As Studied in Saint Catherine of Genoa and Her Friends*, 2 vols (London: Dent, 1908), I: pp. 50–82. On von Hügel and mysticism, see Lawrence F. Barmann, ‘Mysticism and Modernism in Baron Friedrich von Hügel’s Life and Thought’, in *Modernists and Mystics*, pp. 23–38.

<sup>47</sup> Henri Bremond, *A Literary History of Religious Thought in France: From the Wars of Religion down to Our Times*, trans. by K. L. Montgomery, 3 vols (London: SPCK, 1928–1936), II: *The Coming of Mysticism* (1930), p. 432. On Bremond and mysticism, see C. J. T. Talar, ‘Prayer at Twilight: Henri Bremond’s *Apologie Pour Fénelon*’, in *Modernists and Mystics*, pp. 39–61.

its inexhaustible tide'.<sup>48</sup> As I demonstrate in chapter three, Eliot, ever since his years at Harvard, was thoroughly familiar with the literature of the mystical revival and contemporary studies into the nature and meaning of mysticism, and issues raised by them became an important theme in both his early and later poetry.

The majority of Modernist theologians strongly opposed the interpretation of mysticism as an escape from the world, and conceptualised it as a new way of being in the world – a way in which spiritual experience is seen as significantly complementing the empirical one. Thus, William Inge, Dean of St Paul's Cathedral and prominent Anglican Modernist, argued that 'the spiritual Christianity of the modern epoch is rather called to the consecration of art, science, and social life than to lonely contemplation'.<sup>49</sup> The emphasis on the social dimension of Christianity had a strong appeal to a number of Modernists who, apart from advocating a theological reform of the Church, also called for a translation of Christian doctrine into political action and actively supported democratisation and social reform. Among those who sympathised with Modernism were the French Catholic thinker and politician Marc Sagnier, founder of the *Le Sillon* movement and journal, the Italian priest Romolo Murri, the forefather of Christian Democracy and founder of the socialist journal *Cultura Sociale*, and the Polish Capuchin Izydor Wysłouch, social reformer and author of numerous pamphlets calling for the Church's more active involvement in labour movement.<sup>50</sup> This turn to Christian socialism

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<sup>48</sup> Maurice Blondel, *La Pensée II: Les Responsabilités de la pensée et la possibilité de son achèvement* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1954), p. 266, quoted in Michael J. Kerlin, 'Maurice Blondel: Philosophy, Prayer, and the Mystical', in *Modernists and Mystics*, pp. 62–81 (p. 80).

<sup>49</sup> William Ralph Inge, *Christian Mysticism: Considered in Eight Lectures Delivered before the University of Oxford* (London: Methuen, 1899), pp. 244–245.

<sup>50</sup> For an example of how the relation between socialism and Christianity was perceived in the early twentieth century, see George F. Kennigott, 'The Effect upon the Churches of the Social Movement', *Harvard Theological Review*, 9.3 (1916), 313–330; and William Frederic Badè, 'Italian Modernism, Social and Religious', *Harvard Theological Review*, 4.2 (1911) 147–174. For a discussion of Sagnier and *Le Sillon*, see Alec Vidler, *A Variety of Catholic Modernists* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 191–220. For more on Wysłouch, see Brian Porter-Szűcs, *Faith and Fatherland: Catholicism, Modernity, and Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 24–26. For a comprehensive discussion of early-twentieth-century relationship between Christianity and social democracy, see Peter J. Bernardi, *Maurice Blondel, Social Catholicism, and Action Française: The Clash over the Church's Role in Society during the Modernist Era* (Washington, DC: Catholic

was accompanied by renewed theological reflection on the ways in which religious experience informs social involvement and how the Christian call to unconditional charity can be put into practice in modern society. In 1901, Tyrrell wrote to Bremond:

All along I have been covertly suggesting the solution that God wants to be loved in His creatures and not apart from them. I do not say the contemplative nîsus is illusory or not desirable, but that it is not obligatory; whereas the love of creatures is obligatory. I verily believe this is the teaching of Jesus Christ; and I don't believe the Apostles knew of meditation, or contemplation, or the prayers of quiet or any other prayer than the Pater Noster, i.e. petition for the welfare of man.<sup>51</sup>

The increasing attention paid to the social aspect of Christianity led the Methodist John Wright Buckham to put forward the notion of 'social mysticism', which connected individual religious awakening to social activism.<sup>52</sup> He argued that mystical experience, even though commonly thought of as highly individual, possessed a communal dimension and gave 'the individual fullest and freest touch with his fellows'.<sup>53</sup> According to Buckham, an intense religious experience made the mystic more acutely aware of the bond with and responsibility towards others, which led to a growing recognition of the crucial importance of social service. As I argue in chapter four, such a socially engaged

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University of America Press, 2009); and Gary Lease, *'Odd Fellows' in the Politics of Religion Modernism, National Socialism, and German Judaism* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994).

<sup>51</sup> George Tyrrell, 'Letter to Henri Bremond, 16 September 1901', in *George Tyrrell's Letters*, pp. 51–52 (p. 52).

<sup>52</sup> John Wright Buckham, *Mysticism and Modern Life* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1915), p. 244. In fact, James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* also postulated that the aim of the philosophy of religion should be to 'redeem religion from unwholesome privacy, and to give public status and universal right of way to its deliverances' (p. 432).

<sup>53</sup> Buckham, p. 166. One of the arguments that Buckham puts forward in his discussion of the social character of mysticism is that the mystic's solitude is always relative, as his understanding of Christianity and his place within it is shaped by the tradition of which he or she is part. In a manner that, to a certain extent, is reminiscent of Eliot's way of argumentation in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', Buckham asserts: 'There is certainly a most serious danger into which mystics have often fallen, even some of the greatest of them, of confusing the Inner Light with their own vagrant imaginations and superficial judgments. They have failed to recognize the value of the common testimony, "Christian consciousness," as a source of appeal and evaluation. They have failed still more to realize that it is only through the medium of a society of spiritual persons that these disclosures of truth have been made possible to the individual' (pp. 99–100).

understanding of Christianity comes strongly to the fore in Wittlin's works featuring Francis of Assisi, whom Wittlin presents as both a mystic and a social reformer.<sup>54</sup>

### **The 'New Wine' of Modernism and the 'Old Scholastic Bottles'**<sup>55</sup>

In 1908, the anonymous pamphlet *Modernism: What It Is and Why It Was Condemned* posed a question:

What is 'Modernism'? A few months ago the word was scarcely known in England. To-day it has assumed huge proportions. Within the past few weeks it has formed one of the staples of conversation in club smoking-rooms and drawing-rooms. It has left the semi-obscurity of the theological study, and wandered out into street and market-place. It has broken through the bonds of terms and technicalities, and clothed itself, to some extent at least, in ordinary words and phrases.<sup>56</sup>

Indeed, in 1907 the term 'Modernism' 'wandered out' into the streets of not only England, but the whole of Europe. The encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregi* (Feeding the Lord's Flock), issued by Pope Pius X on 8 September 1907, vividly described and condemned the movement of Modernism, arousing a controversy that would engage the minds of Europe at least until the outbreak of World War I.<sup>57</sup> Countless pamphlets, brochures, and

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<sup>54</sup> See chapter 4, section 2: 'Saint Francis of Assisi: The Modern Saint'.

<sup>55</sup> In a letter to the Polish philosopher Marian Zdziechowski of 24 June 1903, George Tyrrell wrote: 'No one can study the Gospels and not see that our Lord was a "liberaliser"; in relation to the rabbinical scholasticism of the Jewish Church, and this just because of the implications of His universal humanitarian spirit. He was not explicitly a theologian, or a revealer of intellectual orthodoxy, but the diffuser of a spirit, or love, which implied a more liberal theology, a wider and worthier conception of God and of man, and of their mutual relations. This spirit was the new wine that eventually burst the old scholastic bottles.' *George Tyrrell's Letters*, pp. 97–99 (pp. 97–98).

<sup>56</sup> C. S. B., *Modernism: What It Is and Why It Was Condemned* (London: Sands & Co., 1908), p. 7.

<sup>57</sup> For comprehensive accounts of the development of the Modernist controversy in the Roman Catholic Church, see *Catholicism Contending with Modernity: Roman Catholic Modernism and Anti-Modernism in Historical Context*, ed. by Darrell Jodock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); David G. Schultenover, *A View from Rome: On the Eve of the Modernist Crisis* (New York: Fordham University

newspaper and journal articles by those who were dubbed ‘Modernists’ and their opponents, ‘anti-Modernists’, would be published in a number of European languages. As Fordham asserts, after 1907 it was hardly possible to use the word ‘Modernism’ without evoking the theological controversy.<sup>58</sup> Writing in 1908, the literary critic R. A. Scott-James recognises and complains of this semantic shift, accusing theologians of ‘appropriating words and destroying their value for all other purposes than their own’.<sup>59</sup> Twenty years later, T. S. Eliot records his ‘disgust with the foul word *modernist*’, which, according to him, ‘is, unhappily, necessary in theology; but it could be easily avoided in poetry’.<sup>60</sup>

Historically, then, theological Modernism provides an important, though largely overlooked context for discussing cultural, aesthetic, and literary modernisms. Defining this context unequivocally, however, is by no means an easy task. The term was employed as a pejorative label by the Vatican, and subsequently reclaimed by Roman Catholic thinkers who accepted the gauntlet and redefined Modernism in accordance with their own agendas. After World War I, when the Roman Catholic crisis was defused and the Vatican’s anti-Modernist stance prevailed, the term Modernism was re-appropriated and recast as a positive label by a party of the Church of England that formed the Modern Churchman’s Union, as well as a number of Protestant groups in the United States.<sup>61</sup> Any

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Press, 1993); Gabriel Daly, *Transcendence and Immanence: A Study in Catholic Modernism and Integralism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980); Lester R. Kurtz, *The Politics of Heresy: The Modernist Crisis in Roman Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); and Marvin R. O’Connell, *Critics On Trial: An Introduction to the Catholic Modernist Crisis* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1994); and *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 25.1: *Pascendi dominici gregis* 1907–2007: Centennial Essays on Responses to the Encyclical on Modernism (2007).

<sup>58</sup> Fordham points out that ‘[b]etween 1907 and 1930 there were over 350 references to the term in the *Times*: ninety per cent of these refer to the theological context of Modernism; the remainder feature in articles on architecture, music or literature’ (p. 12).

<sup>59</sup> R. A. Scott-James, *Modernism and Romance* (London: John Lane, 1908), p. ix.

<sup>60</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘Letter to John W. Nance, 19 December 1929’, in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, 4 vols (London: Faber and Faber, 2009–2013), iv: 1928–1929, ed. by Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden (2013), pp. 722–723 (p. 723).

<sup>61</sup> For a discussion of Anglican Modernism, see Alan M. G. Stephenson, *The Rise and Decline of English Modernism* (London: SPCK, 1984); and Clive Pearson, Allan K. Davidson, Peter James Lineham, *Scholarship and Fierce Sincerity: Henry D. A. Major: The Face of Anglican Modernism* (Auckland: Polygraphia, 2006). On the Modernist–Fundamentalist controversy in the United States, see George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism*,

discussion of the relationship between theological and cultural modernisms needs to begin with a recognition that at the beginning of the twentieth century, the theological term ‘Modernism’ was constantly disputed and its meaning repeatedly redefined. It is with the excavation of the different historical uses of this term that an analysis of its wider cultural significance must begin.<sup>62</sup>

Unravelling the layers of meaning that comprise theological Modernism is not a straightforward task, since, as the historian Gabriel Daly asserts, ‘defining modernism is a political act, in that it commits one, if not to a position, at least to a perspective from which to launch one’s investigations: and this can have ideological implications.’<sup>63</sup> Daly strongly warns against construing definitions that take as their source the *Pascendi* encyclical and other papal documents that condemned the movement as ‘the synthesis of all heresies’: ‘The condemnation of modernism cannot be allowed to set the agenda, for the very good reason that it is itself a major part of the problem to be resolved. Rome did much to create the monster it slew’.<sup>64</sup> In fact, those who considered themselves Modernists, or sympathised with the movement, in the wake of the Vatican condemnation proposed their own counter-definitions of Modernism. Tyrrell redefined it as ‘the belief that Catholicism is reconcilable with the established results of historical criticism’, and

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1870–1925, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Bradley J. Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and Moderates* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992); and Gary J. Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity 1900–1950* (London: Westminster John Knox, 2003). For a discussion of Modernism across different denominations, see Ernestine van der Wall, ‘Believing, Belonging, and Adapting: The Case of Religious Modernism’, in *Orthodoxy, Liberalism, and Adaptation: Essays on Ways of Worldmaking in Times of Change from Biblical, Historical and Systematic Perspectives*, ed. by Bob Becking (Leiden: Brill, 2011), pp. 91–114.

<sup>62</sup> This is a much under-studied area into which more research needs to be done, since, as the historian Ernestine van der Wall has recently aptly observed, ‘[o]ne gets the impression that there is a kind of amnesia among intellectuals today concerning the history of the conflicts over modernism, whether the subject is Catholic, Anglican or Protestant modernism.’ Ernestine van der Wall, *The Enemy Within: Religion, Science, and Modernism* (Wassenaar: NIAS, 2007), p. 45.

<sup>63</sup> Gabriel Daly, ‘Newman, Divine Revelation, and the Catholic Modernists’, in *Newman and the Word*, ed. by Terrence Merrigan and Ian T. Ker (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), pp. 49–68 (p. 58).

<sup>64</sup> Daly, p. 59. Pius X, ‘Pascendi Dominici Gregis’, *Acta Sanctae Sedis*, 40 (1907), 593–650. All quotations are from the English translation included in *The Papal Encyclicals*, ed. by Claudia Carlen, 5 vols (Washington, DC: McGrath, 1981), III: 1903–1939, pp. 71–98 (p. 89, § 39).

added that '[a]s to the mode of reconciliation, there are as many Modernisms as there are Modernists'.<sup>65</sup> For Tyrrell, the crucial feature of Modernism was its dynamic nature; he regarded it as 'a relative term' whose meaning 'slides with times'.<sup>66</sup>

Thus, the beginning of the twentieth century saw the meaning of the term Modernism fluctuate and acquire new dimensions. For the sake of clarity, Daly puts forward a historical definition of Modernism, which is also the starting point for my discussion:

the term employed by Pius X and his curial advisers in their attempt to describe and condemn certain liberal, anti-scholastic, and historico-critical forms of thought occurring in the Roman Catholic Church between c. 1890 and 1914. It can be reasonably said to have begun with Maurice Blondel's doctoral thesis for the Sorbonne entitled *L'Action*.<sup>67</sup>

Blondel's thesis, which marked the beginning of his philosophical career, was submitted in 1893, and came as a shock both to his examiners from the philosophy department of École Normale Supérieure of Paris, and to neo-scholastic theologians who subsequently reviewed it. Blondel's key premise, on which the whole thesis was grounded, was that '[i]t is into action that we shall have to transpose the center of philosophy, because there is also to be found the center of life'.<sup>68</sup> According to him, overemphasis on abstract thought made it impossible for philosophy to approach human life holistically and dynamically. His 'science of action' also endorsed the question of human action directed towards the transcendent, which he considered unjustifiably ignored by contemporary philosophy. The

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<sup>65</sup> George Tyrrell, "'Revelation as Experience": An Unpublished Lecture of George Tyrrell' ed. by Thomas M. Loome, *Heythrop Journal*, 12.2 (1971), 117–149 (130).

<sup>66</sup> George Tyrrell, *Medievalism: A Reply to Cardinal Mercier* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908), p. 144.

<sup>67</sup> Daly, p. 60. Maurice Blondel, *L'Action: Essai d'une critique de la vie et d'une science de la pratique* (Paris: Alcan, 1893). All quotations are from the following edition: Maurice Blondel, *Action (1893): Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice*, trans. by Oliva Blanchette, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

<sup>68</sup> Blondel, *Action (1893)*, p. 13.

shift in methodology that Blondel proposed was not received well by the secular environment of his university, where arguing for the supernatural was considered too religious, nor by the theological circles, where it was met with strong neo-scholastic opposition that disapproved of Blondel's dynamic and experiential understanding of faith.<sup>69</sup> In 1896, to address the latter's objections, Blondel published *The Letter on Apologetics*.<sup>70</sup> He defended his position by arguing that theology should share in the dynamism of life, but, according to Blondel, neo-scholasticism – the principal school of theology in contemporary Catholicism – failed to do so, offering only a 'static account' of religion. A major problem of neo-Thomism (as neo-scholasticism came to be called after Thomas Aquinas) is that, Blondel argues, it builds on premises that are increasingly questioned by modern philosophy and science:

And since the thomist starts from principles which, for most part, are disputed in our time; since he does not offer the means of restoring them by his method; since he presupposes a host of assertions which are just those which are nowadays called in question; since he cannot provide, in his system, for the new requirements of minds which must be approached on their own ground, one must not tend to treat this triumphant exposition as the last word. [...] We must not exhaust ourselves refurbishing old arguments and presenting an *object* for acceptance while the *subject* is not disposed to listen. It is not divine truth which is at fault but human preparation, and it is here that our effort should be concentrated.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Daly remarks that Blondel's decision to submit his dissertation was an 'academic suicide'. After Blondel received his doctorate, 'for two years he found it impossible to secure a university teaching post for no other reason than that he had allowed revealed religion to invade an area considered to be secular by definition'. *Transcendence and Immanence*, pp. 29–30. See also George H. Tavard, 'Blondel's Action and the Problem of the University', in *Catholicism Contending with Modernity*, pp. 142–168.

<sup>70</sup> Maurice Blondel, 'Lettre sur les exigences de la pensée contemporaine en matière d'apologétique et sur la méthode de la philosophie dans l'étude du problème religieux', *Annales de Philosophie chrétienne*, 131 (1896), 337–347, 467–482, 599–616; 132 (1896), 225–267, 337–350. All quotations are from the following translation: *The Letter on Apologetics, and History and Dogma*, ed. and trans. by Alexander Dru and Iltyd Trethowan (London: Harvill Press, 1964).

<sup>71</sup> Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics*, p. 146.

Blondel envisaged this concentration of effort to develop a new apologetics adequate to contemporary times as the building of bridges between modern philosophy and Christian doctrine. He argued that viewing the latter through the lens of the former might bring to the fore those aspects of Christian tradition that needed reconsideration. He proposed to proceed by examining the developments in modern philosophy that seemed to make it incompatible with Christianity, and approach the conclusion of such an examination in a constructive way:

without incriminating anybody, without misconceiving the services which our very adversaries render us, even if involuntarily, but with that intellectual charity which is perhaps the rarest of all, and which by always thinking the best of people often brings it out, let us profit by the beneficent transformation of apologetics which those philosophers who are most alien or hostile to Christianity have made possible and necessary. [...] Perhaps, on coming to the end of this inquiry, we may consider that the intensified demands of modern thought are legitimate and profitable, and in conformity both with the philosophical spirit and with the spirit of Catholicism itself.<sup>72</sup>

Blondel's call to engage with modern philosophy was contrary to the recommendation that scholastic philosophy should be the official doctrine of the Church included in the *Aeterni Patris* ([The Son of the] Eternal Father) encyclical issued by Pope Leo XIII in 1879.<sup>73</sup> The encyclical warned against 'false wisdom' of certain modern philosophers and stated that the Church philosophy and theology was to be based on the restored 'solidity and excellence' of Aquinas's writings.<sup>74</sup> Blondel's call for the broadening of the scope of theological enquiry was received as an unwelcome voice of dissent.<sup>75</sup> He was attacked by the neo-scholastic circles of *Revue thomiste* (Thomist

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>73</sup> Leo XIII, 'Aeterni Patris', *Acta Sanctae Sedis*, 12 (1879), 97–115. All references are to the English translation included in *The Papal Encyclicals*, II: 1878-1903, pp. 17–27.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 25–26, § 27, 31.

<sup>75</sup> On the reception of Blondel's work, see Alexander Dru and Illtyd Trethowan, 'Introduction', in Blondel, *Letter on Apologetics*, pp. 11–116; and Daly, *Transcendence and Immanence*, pp. 26–50.

Review) and referred to as ‘a Kantian’, ‘an immanentist’, and ‘a subjectivist’.<sup>76</sup> As Daly points out, these were ‘the key phrases of the anti-modernist campaign which would reach full orchestration’ in the *Pascendi* encyclical ten years later.

The British Jesuit George Tyrrell presented a similarly penetrating critique of the neo-scholastic method, which he denounced for perpetuating ‘medievalism’.<sup>77</sup> Tyrrell insisted on differentiating between the statements of faith formed in the past, and spiritual experiences that led to the formulations of those theological statements. Reacting against what he considered the neo-scholastic over-rationalisation of the Christian message, Tyrrell argued that ‘[i]t is not by Reason but by Faith that we recognize the prophet’s words as divine, as spoken by God to the ear of our own heart’, adding that ‘[a]ll Faith is response to a private and personal revelation’.<sup>78</sup> For Tyrrell, it was important to acknowledge that ‘the inspired statement is not strictly a divine statement’ and that ‘another expression of the same experience may be better, without in any sense being deduced from the former statement or even agreeing with it intellectually’.<sup>79</sup> According to Tyrrell, Christian revelation cannot be regarded as being fully and definitely stated in the Scripture and Tradition, as neo-scholastic theologians would maintain. Emphasising the value of individual experience, he put forward what he called ‘a truer idea of revelation’:

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<sup>76</sup> Dru and Trethowan, ‘Introduction’, in Blondel, *Letter on Apologetics*, p. 56.

<sup>77</sup> Tyrrell defined ‘medievalism’ as ‘the synthesis effected between the Christian faith and the culture of the late Middle Ages’ which ‘erroneously supposes itself to be of apostolic antiquity’. According to him, medievalism ‘denies that the work of synthesis is necessary and must endure as long as man’s intellectual, moral, and social evolution endures; which therefore makes the medieval expression of Catholicism its primitive and its final expression’. *Medievalism*, p. 144. Tyrrell’s views became extremely influential in the circles of British Modernists. Raised as an Anglican in Dublin, Tyrrell joined the Roman Catholic Church in 1879, and in 1880 entered the Jesuit order. He soon became friendly with a number of thinkers who later came to be known as Modernists, including Alfred Loisy and the Jesuit Henri Bremond in France, and Friedrich von Hügel and the nun Maude Petre in England. He was a prolific writer and publicist who fiercely defended the cause of Modernism. In 1906, Tyrrell was eventually expelled from the Jesuit Order for publicly voicing his outspoken views. See also David G. Schultenover, *George Tyrrell: In Search of Catholicism* (Shepherdstown, WV: Patmos, 1981); *George Tyrrell and Catholic Modernism*, ed. by Oliver R. Rafferty (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010); and Lawrence F. Barmann, ‘The Pope and the English Modernists’, *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 25.1 (2007) 31–54.

<sup>78</sup> George Tyrrell, ‘Revelation as Experience’, p. 131.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 135–136.

The revelation lies not in the word or statement nor in the intellectual thought that it evokes; but in the interior experience of redemption through Christ which it occasions and by which it is interpreted. [...] Divine truth I still think is revealed to us, not as a statement but as a thing – just as beauty or love is revealed to us. We may utter it in statements or receive it through statements; but what we apprehend is not a statement but an experience.<sup>80</sup>

Such a revelational understanding of experience entailed a radical departure from the official teaching of the Church, according to which the true deposit of Christian faith is fully contained in the Scripture and Tradition transmitted from generation to generation through the apostolic succession. Tyrrell acknowledges the importance of the continuity of tradition, yet disapproves of the idea that its truth-value is absolute; he emphasises that a ‘true hypothesis does not exclude a truer’ and a ‘useful symbol leaves room for a more useful’.<sup>81</sup> According to Tyrrell, the development of Christian doctrine through personal revelation is possible due to the work of the ‘indwelling spirit of Christ’ – ‘present to all men at all times’ and inspiring people to see new meanings in the old doctrines.<sup>82</sup>

The idea of an evolutionary and dynamic nature of Christian doctrine was further developed by Alfred Loisy, a Roman Catholic priest, theologian, and former professor of Hebrew at the Institut Catholique in Paris, in his *L’Évangile et l’Église* (1902).<sup>83</sup> The book was written as a critique of the Protestant Adolf von Harnack’s *Das Wesen des Christentum* (1900), yet the method that Loisy chose to refute Harnack’s argument did not

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>83</sup> Alfred Loisy, *L’Évangile et l’Église* (Paris: Picard, 1902); it was published English in 1903 as *The Gospel and the Church*, trans. by Christopher Home (London: Isbister and Co., 1903). All quotations are from the English edition. For a comprehensive account of Loisy’s role in the Modernist controversy, see Harvey Hill, ‘The Politics of Loisy’s Modernist Theology’, in *Catholicism Contending with Modernity*, pp. 169–190; ‘More than a Biblical Critic: Loisy’s Reform Agenda in Light of His Autobiographies’, in *Personal Faith and Institutional Commitments: Roman Catholic Modernist and Anti-Modernist Autobiography*, ed. by Lawrence F. Barmann and Harvey Hill (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 2002), pp. 13–37; and *The Politics of Modernism: Alfred Loisy and the Scientific Study of Religion* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of American Press, 2002).

meet with the approval of the Vatican's neo-Thomists.<sup>84</sup> Loisy disagreed with Harnack's static account of Christianity, and argued that 'Christ is inseparable from His work', and 'the attempt to define the essence of Christianity according to the pure gospel of Jesus, apart from tradition, cannot succeed, for the mere idea of the gospel without tradition is in flagrant contradiction with the facts submitted to criticism'.<sup>85</sup> Explicitly attacking the liberal Protestant perspective of Harnack for his rejection of the idea of the evolution of Christian tradition, Loisy implicitly criticises the neo-scholastic method, which – in a way similar to Harnack's – attempted to circumscribe the pure and static 'essence' of Christianity. Loisy puts such an approach in question, challenging it with a dynamic vision of Christianity:

Why not find the essence of Christianity in the fullness and totality of its life, which shows movement and variety just because it is life, but inasmuch as it is life proceeding from an obviously powerful principle, has grown in accordance with a law which affirms at every step the initial force that may be called its physical essence revealed in all its manifestations? Why should the essence of a tree be held to be but a particle of the seed from which it has sprung, and why should it not be recognized as truly and fully in the complete tree as in the germ?<sup>86</sup>

Loisy accentuates the importance of viewing Christian tradition as dynamic and constantly evolving. The metaphor of a living tree is emblematic of Loisy's vision of the development of Christianity; as C. J. T. Talar observes, '[i]n focusing on a change as a natural process of growth, he was able to admit very real historical differences in the church's teaching

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<sup>84</sup> Adolf von Harnack, *Das Wesen des Christentums* (Leipzig: Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1900). The book, whose title literally translates as 'The Essence of Christianity', was published in English as *What is Christianity?: Sixteen Lectures Delivered in the University of Berlin during the Winter Term 1899–1900*, trans. by Thomas Bailey Saunders (London: Williams and Norgate, 1901). For a detailed account of contemporary debates concerning the existence and definition of the 'essence of Christianity', see Guglielmo Forni, *The Essence of Christianity: The Hermeneutical Question in the Protestant and Modernist Debate (1897–1904)* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1995).

<sup>85</sup> Loisy, p. 13.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

while preserving an element of continuity'.<sup>87</sup> In *The Gospel and the Church*, Loisy undertakes a detailed historical analysis of how the core dogmas of the Roman Catholic Church have developed over centuries, and eventually concludes:

The conceptions that the Church presents as revealed dogmas are not truths fallen from heaven, and preserved by religious tradition in the precise form in which they first appeared. The historian sees in them the interpretation of religious facts acquired by a laborious effort of theological thought. Though the dogmas may be Divine in origin and substance, they are human in structure and composition.<sup>88</sup>

On this premise, Loisy argues that the reconciliation of Christian orthodoxy and modern thought would not strike at the heart of the former, but would in fact be in accordance with its inner dynamism. For Loisy, the most important task to be faced by contemporary Christians is to 'recognize how necessary and useful is the immense development accomplished in the Church, to gather the fruits of it and continue it', as the changing living conditions require constant rereading and reinterpretation of the Gospel message.<sup>89</sup> Such an understanding of Christian tradition was found unacceptable by the Holy Office, and on 16 December 1903 five of Loisy's publications were placed on the Index of Prohibited Books.<sup>90</sup>

Propositions similar to Blondel's, Tyrrell's, and Loisy's were expressed by a number of other religious thinkers who attempted to rethink the relationship between Christianity and modernity, and ideas that later came to be known as 'Modernist' were developed not only in France and England, but in a number of European countries.<sup>91</sup> They

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<sup>87</sup> C. J. T. Talar, 'Introduction', in Alfred Loisy, *Prelude to the Modernist Crisis: The 'Firmin' Articles of Alfred Loisy*, trans. by Christine Thirlway, ed. by C. J. T. Talar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. vii–xxiii (p. xiv).

<sup>88</sup> Loisy, *The Gospel and the Church*, pp. 210–211.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 276.

<sup>90</sup> The titles placed on the Index were *L'Évangile et l'Église*, *Autour d'un petit livre* [About a Little Book], *La Religion d'Israël* (trans. into English as *The Religion of Israel* in 1910), *Études évangéliques* [Studies in the Gospels], and *Le Quatrième Évangile* [The Fourth Gospel]. On the Vatican's reaction to Loisy's work, see also Daly, *Transcendence and Immanence*, pp. 165–189.

<sup>91</sup> On the development of theological Modernism in Spain and contemporary writers' engagement with it, see Juan Cózar Castañar, *Modernismo teológico y modernismo literario: Cinco ejemplos españoles*

were subsequently disseminated through translations and prolific correspondence. These epistolary networks reveal the significance of Modernism as a movement of a truly international scale.<sup>92</sup> However, the movement was far from homogenous, and it is important to bear in mind that, as Darrell Jodock contends, Modernists ‘often were openly critical of each other; they formed no uniform group’.<sup>93</sup> What united them was the aim they all had in common which, in the words of the British nun Maude Petre, Tyrrell’s friend and biographer, was to give expression of:

a certain religious attitude, the attitude of those Catholics or Christians who have maintained that religious faith must not only tolerate the co-existence of

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[Theological Modernism and Literary Modernism: Five Spanish Examples] (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 2002). On the development of Modernism in the Netherlands and Belgium, see *Religious Modernism in the Low Countries*, ed. by Leo Kenis and Ernestine van der Wall (Leuven: Peeters, 2013). On the Modernism–Anti-Modernism controversy in Switzerland, see Johannes Flurry, *Decurtins Kampf um die Kirche: Antimodernismus im Schweizer Katholizismus* [Decurtin’s Fight for the Church: Anti-Modernism in Swiss Catholicism] (Chur: Bündner Monatsblatt, 1997). For a comprehensive discussion of the development of Modernism in Germany, see Otto Weiss, *Der Modernismus in Deutschland: Ein Beitrag zur Theologiegeschichte* [Modernism in Germany: A Contribution to History of Theology] (Regensburg: Pustet, 1995). On Modernism in Poland, see Roman Padoł, *Filozofia religii polskiego modernizmu* [Polish Modernism and Philosophy of Religion] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1982).

<sup>92</sup> The Modernists’ correspondence published in English includes the following volumes: *George Tyrrell’s Letters*, ed. by Maude D. Petre (London: Unwin, 1920); *Letters from a ‘Modernist’: The Letters of George Tyrrell to Wilfred Ward, 1893-1908*, ed. by Mary Jo Weaver (London: Sheed and Ward, 1981); *The Letters of Baron Friedrich von Hügel and Maude D. Petre: The Modernist Movement in England*, ed. by James J. Kelly (Leuven: Peeters, 2003). The volumes published in French include: *Lettres de George Tyrrell à Henri Bremond* [Letters of George Tyrrell to Henri Bremond], ed. by Anne Louis-David (Paris: Aubier, 1971); *Henri Bremond et Maurice Blondel: Correspondance* [Henri Bremond and Maurice Blondel: Correspondence], ed. by André Blanchet, 2 vols (Paris: Aubier, 1970); and *Au Cœur de la crise moderniste: Le Dossier inédit d’une controverse: Lettres de Maurice Blondel, Henri Bremond, Fr. von Hügel, Alfred Loisy, Fernand Mourret, J. Wehrlé* [At the Heart of the Modernist Crisis: The Unedited Dossier of a Controversy: Letters of Maurice Blondel, Henri Bremond, Fr. von Hügel, Alfred Loisy, Fernand Mourret, J. Wehrlé], ed. by René Marlé (Paris: Aubier, 1960). The most substantial collections of unpublished letters and private papers of Modernists are the ‘Papers of the Catholic Modernists’ Collection at the University of St Andrews (comprising papers of Friedrich von Hügel, George Tyrrell, Alfred Lilley, Wilfred Ward, and others), ‘Papers of Maude D. Petre’ Collection of the British Library, Alfred Loisy Collection of Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, and Romolo Murri Collection of the University of Urbino.

<sup>93</sup> Darrell Jodock, ‘Introduction I: The Modernist Crisis’, in *Catholicism Contending with Modernity*, pp. 1–19 (p. 8). An example of such considerable disagreement could be the debate between Blondel and Loisy on the interpretation of the dogma and role of historical criticism. For details of the debate, see Daly, *Transcendence and Immanence*, pp. 69–90.

independent scientific, or historic, or philosophic truth, but must allow the play of such truth on her own domain wherever its rays can penetrate.<sup>94</sup>

The movement of Modernism was officially condemned by Pope Pius X in 1907, and many of those who were involved in it, including Loisy, Tyrrell, and Murri, were excommunicated and their works placed on the Index. The implementation of such extreme measures was a visible sign that the Vatican considered the movement of Modernism a real threat. The reasons for the condemnation were complex. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Catholic Church made numerous attempts to find a manner in which its doctrine could be reconciled with contemporary scholarship. *Aeterni Patris* proposed that faith and reason are not diametrically opposed faculties, but they work together in search of truth. The encyclical embraced the ‘dignity of human science’, stating that the Church doctrine does not aim to curb or diminish the achievements of natural sciences, but on the contrary, endorses them as products of the God-given reason.<sup>95</sup> Pronouncing scholasticism to be the official Church philosophy, it emphasised that the restoration of Aquinas’s system was meant to begin a new phase in the dialogue between secular scholarship and the Church – a period when the Church formally approves the empirical method of natural sciences, and firmly reinstates the place of reason in its teaching, following in the footsteps of medieval scholastics who believed that ‘nothing was of greater use to the philosopher than diligently to search into the mysteries of nature and to be earnest and constant in the study of physical things’.<sup>96</sup> The terms ‘reason’ and ‘science’ feature prominently in the papal documents of the late nineteenth century, bearing witness to the rapprochement between the Church and scientific modernity. It was this advanced enterprise that became severely undermined by Modernist theologians who,

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<sup>94</sup> Petre, *Modernism*, p. 201. For an informative account of Petre’s role in the Modernist controversy, see Clyde F. Crews, *English Catholic Modernism: Maude Petre’s Way of Faith* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

<sup>95</sup> Leo XIII, ‘*Aeterni Patris*’, p. 17, § 1.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26, § 30.

following Bergson's lead, posed a major challenge to rationalistic positivism by turning to the subjective, mystical and irrational (or suprarational) dimensions of religion.<sup>97</sup> Their sustained critique of the neo-scholastic system was a blow to the Vatican's efforts at building a bridge between the world of modernity and Christian tradition and, effectively, to the Church's attempts to avoid marginalisation and to facilitate a dialogue with modern secular society.

Modernist theologians' critique of the neo-scholastic rationalism was found unacceptable by the Vatican. The sixty-five propositions condemned in the decree *Lamentabili Sane Exitu* (A Lamentable Departure Indeed), issued in July 1907, comprised a compilation of key ideas that the Modernists hoped would become the seed of a new Christian apologetics.<sup>98</sup> Church tradition, as presented in *Lamentabili*, consists in immutable and final statements of which it is erroneous to think that they underwent development and could evolve still further.<sup>99</sup> The Modernists' proposals to rethink not only the content of the Church doctrine, but also the methods through which that doctrine had been established turned out to be too revolutionary. Thus, *Pascendi* proclaimed Modernism not only an instance of erroneous thinking, but the 'synthesis of all heresies',

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<sup>97</sup> Bergson's theory is an example of a much wider paradigmatic shift in the understanding of science and scholarship that took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It involved a substantial reassessment of the value of data obtained by observation and a reconsideration of the relevance of speculative scholarship. As Michael Bell points out: 'In the later decades of the nineteenth century, [...] even before quantum or relativity theory, the notion of observation had become problematic. [...] Fundamental knowledge of the universe thus came to be a matter of speculative interpretation yielding possibly competing accounts with no direct observation by which to decide between them. [...] Science ceased to be the paradigmatic form of truth statement and became one of the possible human constructions.' Michael Bell, *Literature, Modernism and Myth: Belief and Responsibility in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 15–16.

<sup>98</sup> Pius X, 'Lamentabili Sane Exitu', *Acta Sanctae Sedis* 40 (1907), 470–478. All quotations are from the English translation included in *Papal Encyclicals Online* <<http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius10/p10lamen.htm>> [accessed 12 February 2014]. Excerpts in English translation are also included in *The Scripture Documents: An Anthology of Official Catholic Teachings*, ed. and trans. by Dean P. Bécharde (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), pp. 183–186.

<sup>99</sup> Among the condemned propositions were Loisy's and Tyrrell's reflections on the experiential nature of revelation and the evolutionary development of the doctrinal tradition. It was declared an error to believe that: 'Revelation, constituting the object of the Catholic faith, was not completed with the Apostles', and 'The dogmas the Church holds out as revealed are not truths which have fallen from heaven. They are an interpretation of religious facts which the human mind has acquired by laborious effort.' Pius X, *Lamentabili Sane Exitu*, propositions 21 and 22.

adding that ‘there is no surer sign that a man is on the way to Modernism than when he begins to show his dislike for this [scholastic] system’.<sup>100</sup> Modernists’ rejection of Aquinas’s system, their repudiation of the proposition that God can be known by reason (which was included in the decrees of the First Vatican Council), their insistence on the idea that Christian doctrine undergoes evolution, and, finally, their attempts to reconceptualise Christian revelation as an experiential event of not necessarily rational order led the authors of the encyclical to the conclusion that Modernism ‘means the destruction not of the Catholic religion alone but of all religion’, as it undermines the objective truth of Catholic faith and gradually leads to agnosticism and then to atheism.<sup>101</sup>

In September 1910, in the *motu proprio* entitled *Sacrorum Antistitum* ([None of] the Holy Bishops), Pius X introduced an oath against Modernism that had to be signed by all members of the clergy and seminary professors. Intended to reinstitute the neo-scholastic understanding of revelation as a set of definitive statements of absolute truth-value, the oath put special emphasis on the rational comprehensibility and static nature of Christian revelation. Those who swore the oath had to declare:

I declare that, by the light of natural reason, God, the beginning and end of all things, can be certainly known through those things that were made, that is to say, through the visible creation, as a cause is known by its effects, and that His existence can even be thereby demonstrated.<sup>102</sup>

The emphasis on the role of ‘the light of natural reason’, by means of which God can be ‘certainly known’, was directed against Modernists’ claims that faith was born not only through a process of reasoning, but also through personal and subjective experience.

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<sup>100</sup> Pius X, ‘Pascendi Dominici Gregis’, p. 91, § 42.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 89, § 39. For a detailed discussion of the *Pascendi* encyclical, see C. J. T. Talar, ‘*Pascendi dominici gregis*: The Vatican Condemnation of Modernism’, *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 25.1 (2007), 1–12; and Daly, *Transcendence and Immanence*, pp. 190–217.

<sup>102</sup> Pius X, ‘*Sacrorum Antistitum*’, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 2 (1910), 655–680. Excerpts in English translation are included in Maude D. Petre, *Modernism: Its Failure and Its Fruits* (London: T. C. & E. C. Jack, 1918), pp. 241–246 (p. 243). The oath was abolished by Pope Paul VI in 1967.

The background of the condemnation of Modernism was not only doctrinal. Politics also played an important role in the Modernist crisis. The fact that Modernists' proposals were put forward at the time when the Vatican was losing its political power – with the Papal States annexed to the Kingdom of Italy in 1870, Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* of the 1870s directed specifically against the Catholic Church, and the French government's launch of a campaign of secularisation in 1902 – meant that not only the Roman Curia's political existence but also its spiritual authority was being threatened.<sup>103</sup> 'As that struggle became more and more impossible,' Gary Lease contends, 'there occurred a retreat from all effective foreign policy and a concentration upon the inner forum: the minds, hearts, will and consciences of the institution's members.'<sup>104</sup> While the political influence seemed irretrievably lost, it was hoped that the anti-Modernist

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<sup>103</sup> The period when the new theological propositions were put forward was the time when significant political transformations were happening in Europe. When the Franco-Prussian War broke out in 1870, the French garrison that protected the last of Papal States on the Italian Peninsula was recalled, and the Italian army captured the city of Rome and the remains of the papal territories. The popes did not leave the Vatican, and until the Lateran Treaty of 1929, when the modern state of Vatican City was established, the pope was often referred to as the 'prisoner of the Vatican'. Furthermore, the beginning of the twentieth century saw the conflict between the Vatican and the French Republic. Émile Combes, who was elected head of the French government in 1902, held the so-called 'campaign of secularisation'. Thousands of religious schools were closed, and high numbers of clergy left France to escape persecutions. As a consequence, the diplomatic relations between the Vatican and France deteriorated. In 1905, the French Parliament passed a law that separated the Church from the State and brought an end to all state support of religion. When Pope Pius X condemned the law, a number of Modernist thinkers and priests expressed their support of it. An anonymous open letter from a group of Italian priests to Pius X published in July 1907, and soon translated into English, stated explicitly: 'The democracy demands of the Church, not only an attitude less conservative and less intent upon favouring the last remnants of the privileged nobility, but also a transformation and purification of forms and persons in her own government, still as tenaciously monarchical and absolute as when she adopted it at the end of the third century and consolidated it in the Middle Ages. To this end those old coercive methods must be abandoned or relaxed; a certain measure of autonomy in their own provinces must be restored to the Bishops; a more liberal consideration shown towards the religious activity of the laity...' *A Pio X. 'Quello che vogliamo', lettera aperta di un gruppo di sacerdoti* ([n.p.]: [n.pub.], [1907]). I quote from the English translation: *What We Want: An Open Letter to Pius X from a Group of Priests*, trans. by Alfred Leslie Lilley (London: John Murray, 1907), pp. 24–25. For a detailed account of the political issues at stake in the Modernist crisis, see Harvey Hill, 'The Politics of Loisy's Modernist Theology', in *Catholicism Contending with Modernity*, pp. 169–190; and Michael J. Kerlin, 'Anti-Modernism and the Elective Affinity Between Politics and Philosophy', in the same collection, pp. 308–336. For an extensive discussion of the development of democratic thought within the Catholic Church, see Jay P. Corrin, *Catholic Intellectuals and the Challenge of Democracy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002).

<sup>104</sup> Gary Lease, 'Vatican Foreign Policy and the Origins of Modernism', in *Catholicism Contending with Modernity*, pp. 31–55 (p. 32). Lease adds that 'the Modernists were condemned broadly as traitors to the continued existence of the Church of Rome as a "nation" state equipped with all the political power and authority accruing to late nineteenth-century European nation states' (p. 51).

campaign, which the 1907 papal documents began, would help regain the Vatican's compromised spiritual authority. A number of pamphlets and books describing the errors of Modernism were published in Italian and French and immediately translated into other languages. The most influential of these was *Catéchisme sur le Modernisme* (*Catechism on Modernism*, 1907) by Jean Baptiste Lemius, credited with drafting the doctrinal parts of *Pascendi*, translated into English, Italian, Spanish, German, Dutch, and Polish within five years after its publication.<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, as Daly observes, intensive study of neo-scholastic manuals that was an obligatory part of seminary education became 'one of the most effective instruments for ensuring the uniformity of Catholic theology down to the meeting of the Second Vatican Council'.<sup>106</sup>

After the movement of Modernism was condemned, some of the Modernists dismissed the Vatican's accusations, like Loisy, who was excommunicated in 1908 and 'responded in 1909 by riding triumphantly in an open car, cheered on by enthusiastic supporters, to his first class at the Collège de France as professor of the "history of religions"'.<sup>107</sup> For others, who still considered themselves Catholics and felt committed to the Church, like Tyrrell in England, the Vatican's anti-Modernist campaign turned into a personal tragedy.<sup>108</sup> While the anti-Modernist campaign sought to discredit Modernism as

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<sup>105</sup> Jean Baptiste Lemius, *Catéchisme sur le Modernisme: d'après l'Encyclique Pascendi Dominici Gregis de S. S. Pie 10* (Paris: Librairie Saint Paul, 1907). In the years following its publication, the volume ran into multiple editions in different languages: *Catechism on Modernism according to the Encyclical 'Pascendi Dominici Gregis' of His Holiness Pius X*, trans. by John Fitzpatrick (London: R. & T. Washbourne, 1908); *Der Modernismus: nach der Enzyklika Sr. H. Papst Pius X. Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, trans. by Nicolaus Stehle (Regensburg: Manz, 1908); *Catechismo sul modernismo: Secondo l'Enciclica Pascendi Dominici Gregis di sua santità Pio X*, trans. by Giuseppe Ioppolo (Rome: Tipogr. Vaticana, 1908); *Catecismo sobre el Modernismo segun la encíclica 'Pascendi Dominici Gregis' de S.S. el Papa Pio X*, [n.trans.] (Barcelona: Luis Gili, 1908); *Katechizm o modernizm wedlug Encykliki Ojca Świętego Piusa X 'Pascendi Dominici gregis'*, [n.trans.] (Warsaw: [n.pub.], 1912). For a detailed discussion of Lemius's work, see Vidler, pp. 16–19; and Daly, *Transcendence and Immanence*, pp. 232–234.

<sup>106</sup> Daly, 'Newman, Divine Revelation, and the Catholic Modernists', p. 53.

<sup>107</sup> Schloesser, p. 56. For Loisy's narrative of the events leading to his exclusion from the Church, see Alfred Loisy, *My Duel with the Vatican: The Autobiography of a Catholic Modernist*, trans. by Richard Wilson Boynton (New York: Greenwood Press, 1924).

<sup>108</sup> Modernists' reaction to the encyclical is well expressed in Blondel's words; while in the 1880s Blondel was positive that a 'great renewal' was taking place in the Church, in 1907 he wrote: 'I have read the Encyclical and am still stupefied. Is it possible? What inward or outward attitude should one adopt?' (quoted in Dru and Trethowan, 'Introduction', pp. 62–63.) Tyrrell was expelled from the Jesuit

a radical departure from the Catholic tradition, Modernists sought to emphasise the connections between their thought and certain elements of the official Church doctrine. Their main point of reference became John Henry Newman, who was made a cardinal by Pope Leo XIII in 1879.<sup>109</sup> His reflections on the development of Christian doctrine and the role of an individual conscience in an act of faith were of primary importance to a number of Modernists.<sup>110</sup> Neo-scholastic methodology was in strong opposition to that proposed

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Order in 1906, and excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church in 1908 for breaking the publication ban. Similar measures were taken against other Modernists, including the Italian theologians Romolo Murri and Ernesto Buonaiuti. In France, Lucien Laberthonnière was forced to step down from the editorial board of *Annales de philosophie chrétienne* and was forbidden to publish any of his theological texts, and Marc Sagnier was compelled to disband *Le Sillon* movement.

<sup>109</sup> On Newman and Modernism, see Daly, 'Newman, Divine Revelation, and the Catholic Modernists'; *Newman and the Modernists*, ed. by Mary Jo Weaver (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985); *John Henry Newman and Modernism*, ed. by Arthur Hilary Jenkins (Sigmaringendorf: Glock und Lutz, 1990); and Stephen Bullivant, 'Newman and Modernism: The *Pascendi* Crisis and Its Wider Significance', *New Blackfriars*, 92 (2011), 189–208.

<sup>110</sup> In 1898, Loisy published the article 'Le Développement chrétien d'après le cardinal Newman' in *Revue du clergé français*, 17 (1898), 5–20. He endorsed Newman's proposition that the development of an 'idea which is living, real, and nonabstract', like Christian doctrine, depends 'largely on the minds that have received it and labour on it further'. 'It grows by assimilating whatever surrounds it', Loisy asserts, 'and its purity comes not from isolating itself from everything, but from dominating everything, from perpetuating itself by dominating everything which approaches it.' If this be true, Loisy argues, then it is a primary task of the Church to develop a synthesis of Christianity and modern thought. 'Whatever risk of corruption may attend contact with the world,' he asserts, 'this risk must be run if the truth is to be understood and receive fuller manifestation'. He envisions the evolution of Christianity as a kind of organic growth, and rejects the 'spirit of preservation', adding that many heresies have been born of it. For him, like for Newman, it is in the dynamism and vitality of change that the spirit of Christianity lies. (All quotations are from the English translation 'The Development of Christianity According to Cardinal Newman', in Loisy, *Prelude to the Modernist Crisis*, pp. 3–16 (pp. 3–4)).

A similar appreciation of Newman's theory of the development of Christian doctrine can be found in von Hügel's writings. After he became acquainted with Newman's work, he paid Newman several visits in Birmingham and exchanged a number of letters with him. In the preface to the first volume of *The Mystical Element of Religion*, von Hügel wrote: 'further back than all the living writers and friends lies the stimulation and help of him who was later on to become Cardinal Newman. It was he who first taught me to glory in my appurtenance to the Catholic and Roman Church, and to conceive this my inheritance in a large and historical manner, as a slow growth across the centuries, with an innate affinity to, and eventual incorporation of, all the good and true to be found mixed up with error and with evil in this chequered, difficult but rich world and life in which this living organism moves and expands' (p. xv).

On the relationship between Loisy's and Newman's thought, see Nicholas Lash, 'Newman and "A. Firmin"', in *John Henry Newman and Modernism*, pp. 56–73; Ronald Burke, 'Was Loisy Newman's Modern Disciple?' in *Newman and the Modernists*, pp. 139–160; and Jeffrey L. Morrow, 'Alfred Loisy's Developmental Approach to Scripture: Reading the 'Firmin' Articles in the Context of Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Historical Biblical Criticism', *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 15.3 (2013), 324–344. For a discussion of von Hügel's engagement with Newman's work, see Lawrence F. Barmann, 'Mysticism and Modernism in Baron Friedrich von Hügel's Life and Thought', in *Modernists and Mystics*, pp. 23–38; Patrick Sherry, 'Von Hügel's Retrospective View of Modernism', in *John Henry Newman and Modernism*, pp. 129–141; and Arthur Hilary Jenkins, 'Newman under Scrutiny: The Modernist Crisis in England and the Issues of Conscience, Obedience and Resistance', in *John Henry Newman and Modernism*, pp. 85–104.

by Newman, who stressed the role of inner experience.<sup>111</sup> The positivism of neo-scholasticism was also explicit in its approach to the question of hermeneutics. Whereas Newman and Modernists emphasised the need for critical reading and interpretation of Scripture that accounts for its literary character, neo-Thomists asserted the objective nature of the history presented in the biblical narrative.

When the *Pascendi* encyclical was issued, the *Times* published a long commentary by Tyrrell, who argued that Catholicism cannot be equated with neo-scholasticism, and referred to the ‘modern and Newmanistic’ idea of development in support of his stance.<sup>112</sup> Tyrrell’s unstated suggestion that together with Modernism, the encyclical implicitly condemned Newman, added fuel to the fire. Tyrrell was excommunicated for his public criticism of the encyclical. On 2 November 1907, after his excommunication became public knowledge, the *Times* published an editorial arguing that:

there are scores of English Roman Catholics to whom the name and example and intellectual influence of John Henry Newman means more than those of a whole *curia* of living Cardinals. It is idle to inquire whether the astute scholar who wrote

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<sup>111</sup> As Daly points out, ‘the neo-Scholastic system was both rationalist and positivist. Its rationalism, which was more methodological than substantive, resulted from its propositional view of revelation and its deductive method of argument. It neglected and, after the condemnation of Modernism in 1907, repudiated, any experiential, affective, or intuitive mode of thought.’ Daly, ‘Newman, Divine Revelation, and the Catholic Modernists’, pp. 54–55.

<sup>112</sup> George Tyrrell, ‘The Pope and Modernism’, *The Times*, 30 September 1907, p. 4; 1 October 1907, p. 5. While von Hügel and Loisy endorsed Newman’s work wholeheartedly, Tyrrell was more ambivalent about it. In the introduction to the English translation of Bremond’s *The Mystery of Newman* – presented as Newman’s psychological biography and hailed by Tyrrell as ‘the first essay in a new line’ – Tyrrell writes about the necessity to distinguish between Newman’s method and the professed substance of his convictions. When it comes to the latter, Tyrrell acknowledges Newman’s ‘incontestable abhorrence of doctrinal liberalism’ and his ‘sympathy with the dogmatic intransigence of scholastic theologians’. If one examines the former, however, one cannot help but notice Newman’s scepticism about the scholastic method and their ‘rationalising spirit’. It is, thus, Newman’s method of theological inquiry, not his theological conservatism, which for Tyrrell makes him truly modern and is worth preserving. George Tyrrell, ‘Introduction’, in Henri Bremond, *The Mystery of Newman*, trans. by H. C. Corrance (London: Williams & Norgate, 1907), pp. ix–xvii (p. xii). On the relation between Tyrrell’s and Newman’s work, see Andrew Pierce, ‘Crossbows, Bludgeons and Long-Range Rifles: Tyrrell and Newman and “the Intimate Connection between Methods and their Results”’, in *George Tyrrell and Catholic Modernism*, pp. 56–75; and Nicholas Sagovsky, “‘Frustration, disillusion, and enduring filial respect’”: George Tyrrell’s Debt to John Henry Newman’, in *Newman and the Modernists*, pp. 97–118.

what the Pope signed was or was not thinking of Cardinal Newman. The important thing is that many Roman Catholics in our country feel that he was so thinking.<sup>113</sup>

The question whether the encyclical was meant to implicitly target Newman's work or not became subject of heated debates in the years to follow.<sup>114</sup> Newman's appeal among those associated with Modernism continued, and in the wake of *Pascendi*, his works were translated into a number of European languages, mostly by theologians, philosophers, and thinkers sympathetic to Modernist thought.<sup>115</sup> The meaning of Newman's work was still vigorously contested sixteen years later, when Eliot's *Criterion* published a heated exchange between Ramon Fernandez and Frederic Manning.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> 'The Vatican and Father Tyrrell', *The Times*, 2 November 1907, p. 9. The theologian Stephen Bullivant in his recent paper argues that the authors of the encyclical could not possibly have aimed at condemning Newman's works. Bullivant points out that the encyclical was commissioned by Cardinal Merry del Val, 'high-ranking, native English-speaking curial official, who was both familiar with Newman's writings, and who actively quoted and recommended them to others' (pp. 199–200). Bullivant also observes that in the arguments on whether or not Newman was included in the *Pascendi* condemnation, 'tensions and ambiguities' of the dormant English anti-Catholicism 'surfaced quite clearly' (p. 204). Stephen Bullivant, 'Newman and Modernism: The *Pascendi* Crisis and its Wider Significance', *New Blackfriars*, 92 (2011), 189–208.

<sup>114</sup> In 1908, Edward Thomas O'Dwyer, Bishop of Limerick, published a pamphlet in defence of the orthodoxy of Newman's thought. His aim was to prove that 'some of the persons who feel the severity of the Pope's condemnation try to shield themselves under the venerable name of Newman'. O'Dwyer thoroughly disapproved of such attempts, arguing that '[t]here is nothing in Newman to sustain, or extenuate, or suggest a particle of their wild and absurd theories.' Arguments between supporters of the Modernist and anti-Modernist interpretations of Newman would continue on the pages of many newspapers and journals. Finally, in March 1908, *The Tablet* printed a letter from Pope Pius X endorsing O'Dwyer's stance and explicitly denying that Newman could be viewed as the spiritual father of Modernism. Modernists, the letter states, 'act wrongly and deceitfully in twisting those [Newman's] words to their own meaning in opposition to the entire context'. Edward Thomas O'Dwyer, *Cardinal Newman and the Encyclical Pascendi Dominici Gregis: An Essay* (London: Longmans & Co., 1908), p. 5; 'The Pope and Cardinal Newman: Letter to the Bishop of Limerick', *The Tablet*, 28 March 1908, p. 491.

<sup>115</sup> The Italian translation of Newman's *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* was done by Romolo Murri and Domenico Battaini and published in 1908. The latter translated also Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1909) and *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk* (1909). Henri Bremond's French translation of *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* came out in 1905. The Polish translation of *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* by Stanisław Brzozowski was published in 1915. All these translators were intellectuals actively involved in the movement of Modernism, and in their own works they further explored contemporary implications of Newman's propositions.

<sup>116</sup> Fernandez, whose stance was close to Modernists, in his reading of Newman argued that the act of belief is creative in its nature, and consists partly in the recognition of a metaphysical reality that already exists, and partly in adding to it personal elements that have never existed before. He asserted that Newman 'set a space between the dogma and the believer' and proved that 'certainty is an act of the believer and not an evidence of the dogma' (pp. 651–652). Thus, Fernandez hailed the coming of 'the age of personality', and dubbed Newman its great thinker who 'does not stop at the logical structures of a doctrine, but pushes it to the human residue, to the personal attitude which this doctrine conceals' (p. 657). Manning called this reading of Newman's work 'partial and incomplete' (p. 20), accusing Fernandez of misrepresenting Newman's thought and, eventually, effecting a 'metamorphosis of

## The Afterlife of Modernism: Towards Global Ecumenism

The Vatican's firm condemnation of Modernism prevented the development of the movement in the Roman Catholic Church, charging those associated with it with heresy and regularly employing the term 'Modernism' to denounce lack of orthodoxy. The atmosphere of suspicion, bred by publication bans, excommunications, and the work of the *Sodalitium Pianum* (Fellowship of Pius), a group of censors whose methods included opening private correspondence of priests suspected of Modernist sympathies, effectively stopped further development of the movement.<sup>117</sup> It also left those who did endorse Modernist ideas embittered and lonely.<sup>118</sup>

The fact that the Modernists did not aim at a schism, but hoped to begin a movement of internal reform, was presented by *Pascendi* as a treason. It was argued that Modernists came in an innocent guise and at first sight appeared to bring no harm. On close inspection, however, they turned out to be an enemy within and, thus, much more dangerous than any external adversaries who would not disguise their true aims. In the time of crisis, 'the partisans of error are to be sought not only among the Church's open enemies', the *Pascendi* encyclical warned, 'they lie hid, a thing to be deeply deplored and feared, in her very bosom and heart, and are the more mischievous, the less conspicuously

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Newman into Nietzsche' (p. 24). Ramon Fernandez, 'The Experience of Newman', *The Criterion*, 3.9 (October 1924), 84–102; Frederic Manning, 'A French Criticism of Newman', *The Criterion*, 4.1 (January 1926), 19–31; Ramon Fernandez, 'The Experience of Newman: Reply to Frederic Manning', *The Criterion*, 4.4 (October 1926), 645–658.

<sup>117</sup> In 1909, the pope's undersecretary of state, Umberto Benigni, founded the secret group 'Sodalitium Pianum' (in France also called 'Sapinière') in response to the pope's call to maintain increased vigilance against Modernism. The members of the group were to inform the Vatican of priests who could possibly hold or spread views considered Modernist. See Darrell Jodock, 'Introduction II: The Modernists and the anti-Modernists', in *Catholicism Contending with Modernity*, pp. 20–28; and Kurtz, chapter 6: 'Institutional Control of Modernist Dissidents', pp. 139–166.

<sup>118</sup> In a letter of 1913, the Catholic historian Edmund Bishop wrote to von Hügel: 'In these days one is so wholly alone – I never "speak" of "things" to a priest now: NEVER since *Pascendi*'. Edmund Bishop, 'Letter to Friedrich von Hügel, 27 January 1913', in Thomas Michael Loome, *Liberal Catholicism, Reform Catholicism, Modernism: A Contribution to a New Orientation in Modernist Research* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald, 1979), pp. 426–430 (p. 430).

they appear'.<sup>119</sup> This perceived threat of Modernism was considered sufficient justification for the strict anti-Modernist policy implemented by the Vatican.

The measures employed by Rome, however, did not lead to the demise of the movement. After the Vatican's condemnation, the term 'Modernism' was appropriated by the liberal-minded members of the Church of England affiliated with the Modern Churchmen's Union. Since 1914, the Union held annual conferences, which in the 1920s and 1930s began receiving much publicity.<sup>120</sup> Their proceedings were published in the *Modern Churchman*, a monthly paper founded in 1911. The most influential among Anglican Modernists were Henry D. A. Major, Hastings Rashdall, William Ralph Inge, and Percy Gardner. The pejorative connotations of the term 'Modernism', attached to it by neo-Thomists, in the works of Anglican Modernists were fundamentally revised. The word was employed to denote a dynamic and experiential understanding of Christianity, similar to that proposed by Catholic Modernists. It was also used in an explicitly anti-Catholic discourse as yet another proof that 'the policy of Rome has never been concession, but repression'.<sup>121</sup> According to Anglican Modernists, the attempts to reform the Catholic Church were from the beginning completely futile, and, as Inge remarked in 1909, '[t]he idea that the Church would ever modify her teaching to bring it into harmony with modern science seemed utterly chimerical'.<sup>122</sup> Catholic Modernists were dubbed 'the brave men who have withstood the thunders of the Vatican', yet their enterprise was considered doomed to failure from the start.<sup>123</sup>

Modernism continued to develop in the Church of England after it was quenched by the Vatican; Alan Stephenson considers the 1920s–1940s 'the flourishing period' of

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<sup>119</sup> Pius X, *Pascendi*, p. 71, § 2.

<sup>120</sup> The Union was founded in 1898 as the Churchmen's Union for the Advancement of Liberal Religious Thought, and changed its name for the Modern Churchmen's Union in 1928. See Stephenson, pp. 52–75. A list of conferences held by the Union from 1914 to 1984 and the titles of the papers presented can be found in Appendix A to Stephenson's book, pp. 206–241.

<sup>121</sup> William Ralph Inge, 'Roman Catholic Modernism', in *Outspoken Essays* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1919; repr. 1920), pp. 137–171 (p. 167).

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

the movement, when its supporters ‘were glorying in the name “Modernist”’.<sup>124</sup> As Major wrote in his influential study, in the Church of England ‘Modernism may be said to breathe its native air and to possess that *habitat* which admits of its growth [...]. Modernism will flourish and develop there, though it may have died in other Christian communions, or have grown up in them a sickly plant’.<sup>125</sup> The 1920s saw a great number of books and pamphlets describing the philosophical and theological foundations of the movement, and its principles and objectives. The challenge was accepted by the Anglican opponents of Modernism and a wave of anti-Modernist literature followed.<sup>126</sup> Among the spiritual

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<sup>124</sup> Stephenson, p. 12.

<sup>125</sup> Major, pp. 43, 47. In a way parallel to the manner in which the term ‘Modernism’ was recast by the Modern Churchmen’s Union, the notion of ‘heresy’ soon acquired a new and positive meaning among the members of the Cambridge Heretics Society, founded in 1909 by the philosopher and linguist C. K. Ogden. It gathered a number of philosophers, religious intellectuals, and avant-garde thinkers, for whom the idea of ‘heresy’ – clearly referring to the Vatican’s condemnation of Modernism – acquired a wider meaning of what Damon Franke describes as an ‘interdisciplinary discursive mode’ and ‘a rallying cry for the general critique of establishmentarian positions’ that could be also applied to modernist ethics and aesthetics (p. xiii). Being a heretic was a reason for pride. Jane Harrison expressed it succinctly in the Society’s inaugural lecture: ‘The word “heretic” has still about it an emotional thrill – a glow reflected, it may be, from the fires at Smithfield, the ardours of those who were burnt at the stake for love of an idea. Heresy, the Greek *hairesis*, was from the outset an eager, living word. [...] Only in an enemy’s mouth did heresy become a negative thing – a sect, causing schism, a rending of the living robe. [...] To be a heretic in the days of Latimer and Cranmer was to burn. To be a heretic in the days of our grandfathers was to be something of a social outcast. To be a heretic to-day is almost a human obligation’ (pp. 27–28). The founding aim of the Heretics Society was to ‘promote discussion on problems of religion, philosophy, and art’, and its membership was open to Cambridge University students and academics who ‘reject traditional a priori methods of approaching religious questions’ (Franke, p. 45). The Society held regular meetings and invited lectures by guest speakers who addressed a wide variety of topics, from the philosophy and history of religion, mysticism, hypnotism, telepathy, and religion and art to scientific materialism, capitalism, Nietzsche, scepticism, liberty, cubism, and futurism. Among the speakers were intellectuals of various religious affiliations, e.g. the Protestant R. J. Campbell, the Roman Catholic G. K. Chesterton, the Presbyterian J. W. Oman, as well as agnostic or atheist thinkers, e.g. George Santayana, Bertrand Russell, G. B. Shaw, I. A. Richards, Clive Bell, Rebecca West, and Virginia Woolf. The wide variety of topics addressed and viewpoints presented, Franke concludes, meant that their heresy ‘foremost implied synthesis, and the desire not so much to remain *opposed* to orthodoxy but to *subsume* it’ (p. 20). In this sense, the Heretics Society’s work could be compared to the Catholic Modernists’ attempt to develop a synthesis out of Catholic orthodoxy and modern thought. For a detailed account of the history of the Society, see Damon Franke, *Modernist Heresies: British Literary History, 1883–1924* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008), pp. 1–76. The list of the meetings of the Society held between 1909–1924 with the names of speakers and titles of their papers is included in the appendix, pp. 219–229. Jane Harrison’s lecture was published as chapter two, ‘Heresy and Humanity’, of her book *Alpha and Omega* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1915), pp. 21–47.

<sup>126</sup> The most influential publications included: Major, *English Modernism* (1927); J. F. Bethune-Baker, *The Way of Modernism* (1927); Percy Gardner, *Modernism in the English Church* (1926); W. Maurice Pryke, *Modernism as a Working Faith* (1925); and Walter Grierson, *Modernism and What it Did for Me* (1929). Among the anti-Modernist publications, the most important were: Charles Harris, *Creeks or No Creeks: A Critical Examination of the Basis of Modernism* (1922); Arthur C. Champneys, *A Different Gospel which is not another Gospel* (1922); and Francis J. Hall, *Christianity and Modernism*

forebears of Anglican Modernism, Stephenson names Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Broad Churchmen, Frederick Denison Maurice, and Frederick Temple, as well as thinkers associated with German, French, and American Liberal Protestantism.<sup>127</sup> The key premise of their theological explorations was similar to Catholic Modernists' ideas; as Major stated: 'The intellectual task of Modernism is the criticism of tradition in the light of research and enlarging experience, with the purpose of reformulating and reinterpreting it to serve the needs of the present age.'<sup>128</sup>

The movement of Modernism was, however, not limited to the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches. Those who considered themselves Modernists were well aware that they were part of a larger network of intellectuals of different religious backgrounds who were attempting to reconcile modernity with religious belief. In his study of Anglican Modernism, Major shows links between Christian Modernisms and similar movements in Egyptian and Turkish Islam, pointing out the importance of religious reforms initiated by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. He also refers to the Jewish reform movement led by Claude Montefiore, one of the founders of British Liberal Judaism, and to Hindu Modernism.<sup>129</sup> This interdenominational nature of Modernism was something that religious thinkers of different backgrounds decided to act upon. What Ernestine van der Wall has recently called a 'global modernist network' was created at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries.<sup>130</sup> At the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions held in Chicago, a number of connections between Christian Modernists and liberal thinkers of other denominations were established. In September 1907, the very moment when the

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(1924). For a comprehensive discussion of the Modernist and anti-Modernist publications of the period, see Stephenson, pp. 12–13.

<sup>127</sup> Stephenson, pp. 40–42.

<sup>128</sup> Major, p. 8.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., pp. 12–13. In a similar vein, Victor Branford in *Living Religions: A Plea for the Larger Modernism* (London: Leplay House, 1924) argued: 'Modernism is by no means confined to the Catholic religion. Kindred endeavours towards readjustment have long been stirring in Hebraism, Hinduism, Mohammedanism, and other venerable religions. All these movements are infused by a common purpose. It is to renew, in the light of current knowledge, yet also of contemporary aspiration, the eternal verities enshrined in ancient faiths' (p. vii).

<sup>130</sup> Van der Wall, *The Enemy Within*, p. 13.

*Pascendi* encyclical condemned Roman Catholic Modernism, the Fourth International Congress of Religious Liberals with delegates from Germany, Austria, Holland, Denmark, Sweden, Hungary, Austria, Italy, Switzerland, Ireland, Scotland, England, as well as New Zealand, Australia, Ceylon, Guiana, India, and Japan, representing a large number of Christian denominations, Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism took place in Boston (several sessions were also held in Cambridge, MA, at Harvard University).<sup>131</sup> Charles William Eliot, T. S. Eliot's cousin, in the closing remarks that he delivered in his capacity as President of Harvard University, emphasised that '[t]he principles which unite this Congress [...] are the principles on which Harvard University was founded and has ever lived', adding that 'religion and liberty going together' stand for 'considerateness, tenderness towards others, not assumption of power or pride of opinion'.<sup>132</sup>

When a few years later Albion Small, the founder of the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago, turned to the study of different types of social bonds, including the denominational ones, he observed:

there is in Christendom today one principal division line. It does not run between sects but as a rule it cuts through sects, leaving one portion of the same sect within the one religious stratum and the remaining portion in the other. It is the line which divides traditionalists from modernists. The late Pope virtually spoke, not merely for the Catholic church, but for traditionalists of all sects [...]. It is needless to analyze the preposterous issue formulated by papal encyclicals of recent years.

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<sup>131</sup> The proceedings of the Congress were published as *Freedom and Fellowship in Religion: Proceedings and Papers of the Fourth International Congress of Religious Liberals, Held at Boston, U.S.A., September 22-27, 1907*, ed. by Charles W. Wendte (Boston: International Council, 1907).

<sup>132</sup> Charles W. Eliot, 'Address of Welcome by President Charles W. Eliot, LL.D.', in *Freedom and Fellowship in Religion*, pp. 240–242 (pp. 240–241). Charles William Eliot largely sympathised with Christian reform movements. In a lecture delivered at the Harvard School of Theology in 1909, he argued that 'religion is not a fixed, but a fluent thing' and that it is 'wholly natural and to be expected that the conceptions of religion prevalent among educated people should changed from century to century'. The lecture, which was published as 'The Religion of the Future', *Harvard Theological Review*, 2.4 (October 1909), 389–407 (p. 390), was subsequently reprinted and circulated among Cambridge University students by William Chawner, Master of Emmanuel College associated with the Cambridge Heretics Society. This met with harsh criticism from the head and several senior fellows of the College, who considered it 'a breach of duty as Master'. See Franke, pp. 58–59.

They have, however, performed the great social service of visualizing the present religious crisis.<sup>133</sup>

Small's astute remark finds direct confirmation in the religious literature of the period. As early as 1907, Reginald John Campbell, an influential Congregationalist minister of London and the founder of the liberal New Theology movement, wrote that 'the same movement exists in other Churches, even the Roman Catholic, and is rising spontaneously everywhere'.<sup>134</sup> In the face of such a wide scope and ecumenical character of the Christian reform movement, some of its opponents perceived the necessity to unite forces. When the Fundamentalist–Modernist Controversy in the Presbyterian Church of America broke out in the 1920s, one of the prominent Fundamentalists remarked: 'If this battle of the ages encircles the world, it may become necessary for the Evangelical Protestants and the Roman Catholics to unite their forces in defence of the Apostles' Creed to resist this world-wide invasion of Atheism'.<sup>135</sup> A number of propositions made by Presbyterian Modernists reflected those put forward by Anglican Modernists, and earlier by Catholic Modernists. The anti-Modernist opposition in each of these denominations would employ strikingly similar discourse, which – if read today out of context – would make it almost impossible to identify the denominational controversy in which it originated. This is also the case with other elements of the religious print culture of the period, as exemplified by anti-Modernist cartoons appearing in a number of journals and magazines, including the *King's Business*, a monthly paper published by the Bible Institute of Los Angeles (see figure 1).<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Albion W. Small, 'The Bonds of Nationality', *American Journal of Sociology*, 20.5 (1915), 629–683 (p. 674).

<sup>134</sup> R. J. Campbell, 'The Aim of the New Theology Movement', *Hibbert Journal*, 5.3 (1907), 481–493 (p. 483).

<sup>135</sup> This statement was made by George F. Washburn in a speech given at a launch of the Bible Crusaders organisation in Clearwater, FL. Quoted after Maynard Shipley, *The War on Modern Science: A Short History of the Fundamentalist Attacks on Evolution and Modernism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927), p. 52. On the American Modernist–Fundamentalist controversy, see Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, pp. 102–195; Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism*, pp. 145–287.

<sup>136</sup> On the *King's Business's* role in the controversy, see Marsden, pp. 144–164. See also Edward B. Davis, 'Fundamentalist Cartoons, Modernist Pamphlets, and the Religious Image of Science in the

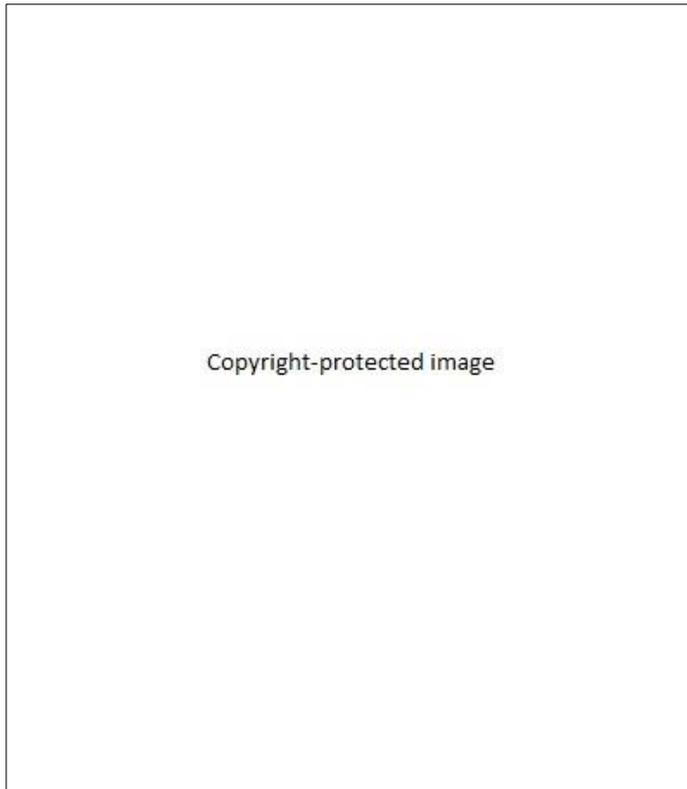


Figure 1. Modernism destroying Christian civilisation.  
*King's Business*, 13 (July 1922), 642.

The cartoon, published in 1922, shows how Modernism, embodied as a giant-like figure, attempts to destroy Christian civilisation. The columns supporting it are threatening to collapse under the force of his muscular arms and legs, which stand for two arch-evils of Modernism: the 'denial of the Bible' that Modernist-oriented churches were accused of spreading through their reinterpretation of certain Christian doctrines, and 'Darwinism' that was considered a threat to the future of Christian education. The physical strength displayed by the giant reflects the degeneration that humankind will undergo if Modernism is allowed to hold sway. The cultivated sophistication of Christian civilisation, represented by the classical architecture of the temple, will be replaced by the primitive and the physical – a return to the barbarity of paganism.

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Scopes Era', in *Religion and the Culture of Print in Modern America*, ed. by Charles L. Cohen and Paul S. Boyer (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), pp. 175–198.

Supporters of Modernism employed similarly satirical strategies to discredit the views held by their opponents. A good example is a short story ‘Alice in Literal-Land’ by John F. Scott published in the *Century Magazine* in 1924.<sup>137</sup> It opens with Alice falling asleep during a dull sermon and finding herself flying on the preacher-bird’s back to a strange land where she is invited to take part in a ‘theological adventure’.<sup>138</sup> The adventure begins in the Cave of Controversy, in which Alice sees ‘people wrangling and shouting and calling names as if their life depended on it’.<sup>139</sup> In the end, she decides to follow the advice of the priest who bids her go to Literal-Land. There she is invited for a ‘theological tea’ and witnesses a heresy trial. The defendant, ‘with a handkerchief tied over his mouth’, is accused of asserting that there is no hell, ‘not meaning what he said’, and ‘stating that a semicolon is missing from the Bible’.<sup>140</sup> The worst, however, is the accusation that the defendant claimed and practised ‘the right to think for himself’. It provokes a knee-jerk reaction from the judge:

‘Enough! enough!’ cried the judge, jumping up and tearing at his hair. ‘We need no more. Gentlemen of the jury,’ turning to the learned doctors, ‘consider your verdict.’

‘But I protest, your Honor,’ cried the defendant’s lawyer. ‘The prisoner should be allowed to speak for himself, to answer the charges.’

‘They need no answer from him,’ said the judge. ‘That handkerchief must not be removed; there’s no telling what he might say in our presence. Let it be thoroughly understood that a man *in his position* may feel for himself and hear for himself, he may eat and even die for himself, but it is forbidden him to think and speak for himself. I will therefore pronounce sentence.’<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> John F. Scott, ‘Alice in Literal-Land: An Allegory of the War in the Churches’, *Century Magazine*, May 1924, pp. 52–59.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

When the lawyer protests again, the judge retorts: ‘We’ll have the sentence first, and the verdict afterward’, adding that the defendant ‘is guilty, anyway’.<sup>142</sup> He is sentenced to a public scourging which is carried out by executioners who sing a special hymn:

The Bible is infallible, which you must not deny.  
Adam named the animals, and Enoch did not die.  
Take care you do not change it, for that would surely breed  
Distrust of our authority! Now, won’t you say the creed?  
Will you, won’t you, will you, won’t you, will you say the creed?  
Will you, won’t you, will you, won’t you, won’t you say the creed?<sup>143</sup>

The degree of universality that can be discerned in the issues addressed in such polemical texts and iconography – they could be used in virtually any of Modernist controversies – testifies to the existence of ‘a host of affinities between Christian modernisms on both sides of the Atlantic’, which has been recently pointed out by van der Wall.<sup>144</sup> The global scope of religious Modernism, she argues, requires a research framework that accounts for its international and interdenominational nature rather than analyses it ‘exclusively within specific contexts’.<sup>145</sup> Thus, in the following chapters I focus on three poets whose works are informed by their movements across both national and religious boundaries. Rilke, raised as a German-speaking Roman Catholic in Austro-Hungarian Prague, found inspiration in Russian Orthodoxy and its religious iconography during his stay in Moscow. Eliot, born in a Unitarian family in St Louis, moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, to study at Harvard, and then emigrated to Britain and embraced Anglo-Catholicism. Wittlin, brought up in a Polish-Jewish family in Austro-Hungarian Lwów (present-day Lviv in Ukraine), after World War I moved to Warsaw and became drawn to Roman Catholicism, in particular Franciscan spirituality, which he explored on his journeys to Assisi. The rise

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>144</sup> Van der Wall, *The Enemy Within*, p. 11.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

of anti-Semitism and the persecutions of Jews before and during World War II forced him to flee to France, and then ultimately to the United States. As the following chapters demonstrate, Rilke's, Eliot's, and Wittlin's encounters with diverse cultural and spiritual traditions other than the ones into which they were born had a powerful influence on their writing, in particular their poetic engagement with the question of how individual experience of the modern Christian believer enters a dialogue with medieval Christian traditions.

### **War and Religion: Reimagining the Real**

The complex network of negotiations and confrontations between Christianity and modernity that existed before World War I, with its outbreak, became even more complicated. What at first may sound like a paradox, 'the most "modern" of wars', Jay Winter observes, 'triggered an avalanche of the "unmodern"'.<sup>146</sup> Religion and different kinds of belief in the supernatural feature prominently in the letters, diaries, memoirs, pamphlets, books, and print culture of the period. The war, which became the formative experience for a number of writers and their readers, lent a new urgency to religious questions. It created a need for a language that would be capable of expressing the horror of the trenches and the trauma of the battles, as well as provide a means of mourning the loss of the loved ones. In the aftermath of the war, Winter contends, '[t]he need to bring the dead home, to put the dead to rest, symbolically or physically, was pervasive.'<sup>147</sup> The wish to communicate with those who had fallen evinced renewed interest in the after-life, the paranormal, and the spiritual. Among the members of Christian churches, prayers and

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<sup>146</sup> Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 54.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

services for the dead became increasingly popular.<sup>148</sup> Those who sought alternative forms of belief often turned to spiritualism, which in some circles was considered a ‘new synthesis between Darwinian evolution and humanistic Christianity’ and had both a ‘visionary and emotional attraction’ and ‘scientific and rational appeal’.<sup>149</sup>

The visible growth of belief in the supernatural stimulated by the war was successfully utilised by official propaganda in numerous pamphlets, brochures, posters, and postcards that presented World War I in religious terms.<sup>150</sup> The propaganda of the Allied Forces would often portray Germany as the *Kultur* that has betrayed Christianity and led Europe to destruction. More importantly, for those who supported the anti-Modernist party before the war, the horror of the trenches was the final proof that the theological movement of Modernism was a misconceived idea. In July 1918, the American Methodist Arno C. Gaebelein wrote: ‘The new theology has led Germany into barbarism, and it will lead any nation into the same demoralization’.<sup>151</sup> Germany’s military actions were presented as ‘related to (among other things) rationalism, evolutionary naturalism, and the philosophy of Nietzsche’.<sup>152</sup> The more conservative a magazine, the more

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<sup>148</sup> In the parliamentary debate on prospective revisions to the Book of Common Prayer held on 12 December 1927, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Randall Davidson, spoke at length about a visible revival of prayers for the dead in the Anglican Communion and argued for the recognition of their doctrinal legitimacy. ‘Anybody who had to do with the War, and saw the way in which the homes of England were shattered by what happened in the War’, he asserted, should be able to understand ‘the need that was everywhere, the craving desire which existed, for some prayers in commemoration of the departed’. *The Parliamentary Debates: Official Report*, House of Lords, 5th series (London: 1909–), LXIX: Third Session of the Thirty-Fourth Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Fourth Volume of Session 1927 (1928), p. 782.

<sup>149</sup> Winter, pp. 59–61. Winter distinguishes here between ‘secular spiritualism’, which was conceived as a ‘quest is psychical and psychological, not theological’, and ‘religious spiritualism’, which he describes as ‘the attitude of people who see apocalyptic, divine, angelic, or saintly presences in daily life, and do so at the margins of or outside the confines of the traditional churches’. He concludes his discussion by asserting that ‘[t]he best way to understand [contemporary] spiritualism is as a family of men and women who were prepared to go beyond conventional materialism or theology and did so in societies, séances, and a host of publications’ (p. 54).

<sup>150</sup> For a comprehensive account of how different denominations were implicated in the war, see Philip Jenkins, *The Great and Holy War: How World War I Became a Religious Crusade* (New York: HarperOne, 2014); Alan Wilkinson, *The Church of England and the First World War*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2014); Jonathan H. Ebel, *Faith in the Fight: The American Soldier and the Great War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); and Annette Becker, *War and Faith: The Religious Imagination in France, 1914–1930*, trans. by Helen McPhail (Oxford: Berg, 1998).

<sup>151</sup> Arno C. Gaebelein, ‘Editorial’, *Our Hope*, 25 (July 1918), p. 48, quoted in Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, p. 148.

<sup>152</sup> Marsden, p. 148.

explicitly would it present the war as the battle over the future of Christian civilisation. Thus, the American Evangelical *King's Business* in an editorial of May 1919 declared:

The Kaiser boldly threw down the gage of battle – Infidel Germany against the believing world – Kultur against Christianity – the Gospel of Hate against the Gospel of Love. [...] this same Kultur, ‘the genius of Infidelity,’ is what many professors in our own land are striving hard to introduce into our Universities in their evolutionary teaching and in their promulgation of the Higher Criticism. If it obtains such a universal sway in our Universities, Colleges and High Schools as it has in Germany it will produce the same results here that it did there.<sup>153</sup>

While it could be supposed that such discourse was restricted to the most conservative Christian audiences, it was not at all uncommon. Similar statements can be found in works of many intellectuals writing during or just after the war. The French philosopher Jacques Maritain, for instance, in his *Antimoderne* (1922), stated: ‘Looking at the war from its philosophical and intellectual aspect, [...] pan-Germanism is the monstrous but inevitable fruit of the great break in balance of the sixteenth century, Germany’s separation from Christianity.’<sup>154</sup> In his *Trois réformateurs* (*Three Reformers*, 1923), Maritain focused on the erroneous aspects of Luther’s, Descartes’s, and Rousseau’s thought, so as to prove that the roots of contemporary endorsement of destructive individualism could be traced back to Germany’s Lutheranism.<sup>155</sup> Thus, contemporary German militarism was presented as directly connected to the Reformation, the Tübingen School of theology, Higher Criticism, and finally, theological Modernism. After the war, this became yet another reason for

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<sup>153</sup> ‘Return to the Dark Ages’, *King's Business*, 9.5 (1918), 365–366. The passage is part of a lengthy citation from Henry Watterson’s editorial published in the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, which the editors of the *King's Business* referred to with full approval.

<sup>154</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Antimoderne* (Paris: Edition de la Revue des Jeunes, 1922), p. 17, quoted in Becker, p. 11.

<sup>155</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Trois réformateurs: Luther, Descartes, Rousseau* (Paris: Plon-Nourrit, 1923), published in English as *Three Reformers: Luther-Descartes-Rousseau*, [n.trans.] (London: Sheed & Ward, 1928).

Catholic neo-Thomists and Protestant Fundamentalists to continue their religious strife against Modernism.

There was, however, yet another way in which the war and religion came into contact. It was more subtle, and, as Annette Becker asserts, did not seem to be directly related to the official anti-German propaganda.<sup>156</sup> Religious language and imagery were employed not only by the military or Church authorities who attempted to enhance soldiers' patriotic commitment; they also became an important recurrent motif of soldiers' private letters and diaries. Becker connects it to the fact that 'the experience of the trenches could not easily be explained in conventional theological (or indeed in any other rational) terms' and, thus, produced 'a host of spiritual images, stories, and legends [that] proliferated during the conflict among frontline troops'.<sup>157</sup> The danger of imminent death revived the faith of many and brought others, who before the war did not participate in religious observations, back to church. Captain Ferdinand Belmont gives an example of such a 'return to the altars' in a letter of 11 October 1914, in which he describes a Catholic mass celebrated by Abbé Paradis, a voluntary chaplain of the ambulance of the 28th division:

A most touching ceremony, I assure you, was this mass, piously followed by four or five hundred soldiers of all arms and ranks, with the priest assisted by two captains, an artilleryman and a doctor, and those prayers repeated by every mouth – prayers for France, and the flag, prayers for all the comrades already left behind, prayers for those left at home, for parents, the old people, the women, the children, and for all the weak ones who have not the happiness to be able to work with the others. Many came there, many confessed and received the Holy Communion who for long years had not directed their footsteps to church, – forgotten through negligence, or deserted through egoism or self-interest. Here all these smallnesses disappear, trial has swept them away, and left to one's own resources every one

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<sup>156</sup> See Becker's discussion of contemporary Christian interpretations of the suffering caused by the war on pages 24–31, and of the war conversions on pages 47–59.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

here seeks for a support which he finds nowhere else. War, to say the least, possesses, like all great sacrifices, an undoubted purifying virtue. Regeneration comes through sacrifice and suffering.<sup>158</sup>

The Christian understanding of sacrifice and suffering had a special meaning for soldiers, as it allowed them to interpret their war experience through the framework of Christ's passion and resurrection, which brought hope of expiation and salvation. The Catholic intellectual Henri Massis in *Le Sacrifice* (1917) went as far as to compare the religious dimension of the experience of the trenches with that of the contemplative solitude of monastic life: 'No anchorite was ever more ardent in his meditations [...]. What monastery, what enclosure can offer such a spectacle of nakedness and abandonment, a deeper, more intense vision of death, such depths of solitude, such a society of fraternal souls sustained by such fervour?'<sup>159</sup> The spiritualised image of a soldier whose sacrifice is compared to Christ's recurs frequently in the war paintings and sketches of Lucien Jonas (see figure 2).

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<sup>158</sup> Ferdinand Belmont, *A Crusader of France: The Letters of Captain Ferdinand Belmont of the Chasseurs Alpains (August 2, 1914–December 28, 1915)*, trans. by G. Frederic Lees (London: Andrew Melrose, 1917), p. 109. The phrase 'return to the altars' is used by Becker, pp. 106–107.

<sup>159</sup> Henri Massis, *Le Sacrifice* (Paris: Plon, 1917), pp. 204–206, quoted in Becker, p. 22.



Figure 2. Lucien Jonas, *Résignation: Debout les Morts!*, 1914–1916. The lithography presents French soldiers re-enacting the sacrifice of Christ. Jonas was mobilised in December 1914, and in 1915 became accredited as military painter of the Musée de l'Armée in Paris.

Another Catholic intellectual and Jesuit priest who lived through the war, serving at the front as a stretcher-bearer, in his letters from the trenches described how the experienced presence of the incarnate Christ could completely transform the landscape of destruction into one of filled with spirit and grace. In one of his war pieces, 'The Spiritual Power of the Matter', Pierre Teilhard de Chardin relates a vision in which, in a sudden moment of illumination, the narrator apprehends a unique redemptive relationship between matter and spirit, with the former being thoroughly permeated with the latter, and thus ultimately unconquerable by death.<sup>160</sup> The narrator hears a voice from above that bids

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<sup>160</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, 'The Spiritual Power of Matter', in *Hymn of the Universe*, trans. by Gerald Vann (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), pp. 53–70. Teilhard de Chardin took part in the battles of Marne and Ypres (1915), Nieuport (1916), and Verdun (1917), and was awarded the Médaille militaire and the Legion of Honour. Throughout the war, he recorded his thoughts and reflections in letters that he regularly sent to his cousin Marguerite Teilhard-Chambon. They were published only in the 1960s.

him: ‘Never say, “Matter is accursed, matter is evil”’: for there has come one who said, “You will drink poisonous draughts and they shall not harm you,” and again, “Life shall spring forth out of death,” and then finally, the words which spell my definitive liberation, “This is my body”.’<sup>161</sup> These words strike him as a new revelation, and he falls to his knees, composing the ‘Hymn to Matter’:

Blessed be you, mighty matter, irresistible march of evolution, reality ever newborn; you who, by constantly shattering our mental categories, force us to go ever further and further in our pursuit of the truth.

Blessed be you, universal matter, immeasurable time, boundless ether, triple abyss of stars and atoms and generations: you who by overflowing and dissolving our narrow standards or measurement reveal to us the dimensions of God.

Blessed be you, impenetrable matter: you who, interposed between our minds and the world of essences, cause us to languish with the desire to pierce through the seamless veil of phenomena.

Blessed be you, mortal matter: you who one day will undergo the process of dissolution within us and will thereby take us forcibly into the very heart of that which exists.

Without you, without your onslaughts, without your uprootings of us, we should remain all our lives inert, stagnant, puerile, ignorant both of ourselves and of God. You who batter us and then dress our wounds, you who resist us and yield to us, you who wreck and build, you who shackle and liberate, the sap of our souls, the hand of God, the flesh of Christ: it is you, matter, that I bless.

I bless you, matter, and you I acclaim: not as the pontiffs of science or the moralizing preachers depict you, debased, disfigured—a mass of brute forces and base appetites—but as you reveal yourself to me today, in your totality and your true nature.

You I acclaim as the inexhaustible potentiality for existence and transformation wherein the predestined substance germinates and grows.

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., pp. 61–62.

I acclaim you as the universal power which brings together and unites, through which the multitudinous monads are bound together and in which they all converge on the way of the spirit.

I acclaim you as the melodious fountain of water whence spring the souls of men and as the limpid crystal whereof is fashioned the new Jerusalem.

I acclaim you as the divine milieu, charged with creative power, as the ocean stirred by the Spirit, as the clay moulded and infused with life by the incarnate Word.<sup>162</sup>

The redemptive relationship between the matter and the spirit, or the natural and the supernatural, that Teilhard de Chardin poses is rooted in the event of the Incarnation. The hymn celebrates the revelational experience in which matter is seen anew and its creative and spiritual potential is powerfully affirmed. In his writings, Teilhard de Chardin continually emphasises the immanence of God, and insists that the ‘mystical Body of Christ should, in fact, be conceived as a physical Reality, in the strongest sense the words can bear’.<sup>163</sup> Inspired by Bergson, he hails the process of evolution as the dynamic growth of the mystical Christ: ‘By the Incarnation, which redeemed man, the very Becoming of the Universe, too, has been transformed. Christ is the term of even the natural evolution of living beings; evolution is holy’.<sup>164</sup> The holiness of matter that Teilhard de Chardin discovered in the face of massive destruction was for him a unique insight that he owed to the experience of war. ‘Through the war,’ he asserted, ‘a rent had been made in the crust of banality and convention. A window was opened on the secret mechanisms and deepest layers of human development.’<sup>165</sup>

Teilhard de Chardin’s reflection on the spiritual aspect of the war was by no means without parallel. Becker, having examined a number of conversion stories from the years

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., pp. 65–67.

<sup>163</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, ‘Cosmic Life’, in *Writing in Time of War*, trans. by René Hague (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), pp. 13–72 (p. 51).

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>165</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Ecrits du temps de guerre* (Paris: Grasset, 1965), pp. 229–239, quoted in Becker, p. 23.

1914–1918, pointed out that the ‘utter dereliction’ brought about by the war was conducive to spiritual transformations.<sup>166</sup> She observed that ‘[s]uffering, even the sure approach of death, plunged individuals into a favourable psychological atmosphere’ in which they were faced with urgent questions of existential importance.<sup>167</sup> One of them was a question concerning the meaning of the material reality surrounding them – a radically defamiliarised world filled with destruction – and its relationship to the potentially invisible reality, one that is not tangible and eludes rational logic, yet perhaps can be intuited or experienced through faith. André Breton, who spent the war working with traumatised soldiers hospitalised in a psychiatric ward in Nantes, addressed this question in his famous *Manifeste du surréalisme* (*Manifesto of Surrealism*, 1924), calling for a radical reimagining of the notion of ‘reality’. He asserted:

the realistic attitude, inspired by positivism, from Saint Thomas Aquinas to Anatole France, clearly seems to me to be hostile to any intellectual or moral advancement. [...] in this day and age logical methods are applicable only to solving problems of secondary interest. The absolute rationalism that is still in vogue allows us to consider only facts relating directly to our experience. Logical ends, on the contrary, escape us. It is pointless to add that experience itself has found itself increasingly circumscribed. It paces back and forth in a cage from which it is more and more difficult to make it emerge. [...] Under the pretence of civilization and progress, we have managed to banish from the mind everything that may rightly or wrongly be termed superstition, or fancy; forbidden is any kind of search for truth which is not in conformance with accepted practices.<sup>168</sup>

For Breton, the ultimate aim of contemporary art should be to reclaim the experience of ‘the presence of the marvellous’ and the ‘passion for eternity’ – invisible and

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<sup>166</sup> Becker, p. 51.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> André Breton, ‘Manifesto of Surrealism (1924)’, in André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1972), pp. 1–47 (pp. 6–10).

unmeasurable, yet of vital importance for a holistic understanding of humanity.<sup>169</sup> The ‘surreality’ that he proclaimed was to be a fusion of two seemingly contradictory states: reality and dream, which, he asserted – when joint together – reveal ‘the absolute reality’. Its aim is to transcend the ‘increasingly circumscribed’ understanding of experience and create spaces where that which violates the laws of reason can find expression.<sup>170</sup>

Teilhard de Chardin’s mystical Christological realism and Breton’s surrealism are just two examples of post-war attempts to reimagine the real through a reflection on how the experience of the trenches shaped people’s perception of life and death and made them more open to the idea that there is an invisible or supernatural side to reality. Questions relating to the nature of reality became a vital issue not only for those who directly witnessed the atrocities of the war, but also for those who stayed behind and listened to the stories brought from the front by their friends and relatives, mourning those who did not return. The war could be as transformative an experience for them as for those who spent it in the trenches. John Middleton Murry’s autobiographical reminiscence is a good example of this:

The war was a thunderclap. I had not thought that a war was possible. [...] My friends were enlisting, so I enlisted; it seemed the only thing to do. I simply was borne along in the stream. After one day as a recruit in a drill-hall, I was rejected by the doctor. I think I was glad. [...] In the meantime my friends had begun to be killed. I was totally unprepared for their deaths. Men of my own age, who had shared my interest, and whom after my fashion I loved, were suddenly blotted out. A chasm yawned in my universe. Day after day I brooded over this abyss, to no end. My instinctive fear of life became a hatred and a terror. The world was mad. Sometimes fantastic plans entered my head; once I was obsessed for days with the notion of climbing on to the plinth of one of the lions in Trafalgar Square and shooting myself as a protest against the horror. I was sane enough to realize that I

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., pp. 14–15.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

should be counted only as another madman; and in my heart I was too much of a coward for such an act: but I despised myself for my failure.<sup>171</sup>

For Murry this was a purgative experience. He contended that the war ‘made the dark things clear and the clear things dark once more’.<sup>172</sup> The religious awakening that the war brought about, he argued, should be regarded as equally or perhaps even more important than the redrawing of the map of Europe debated at the Congress of Vienna. He declared that ‘[t]he fundamental thing is that the leaven of a religious sense is at work in the world,’ and that his contemporaries accept ‘the burden of the guilt’, ‘cast away the old barren littleness of soul’, and ‘live dangerously’.<sup>173</sup> One way to do it, Murry maintained, was to inquire once again into the nature of reality and reject any prefabricated answers. The real, he asserted, ‘inevitably escapes from the hands of those who imagine that they hold it’, but in fact grasp after shadows; hence, the pressing need to ‘find the secret, to make the new synthesis’ in the aftermath of the war.<sup>174</sup> The manner in which this new synthesis could be conceptualised became the subject of the noted Eliot–Murry debate, discussed in detail in chapter three.

What Murry’s reflections, and Teilhard de Chardin’s and Breton’s attempts to reimagine the real had in common was their openness towards the unseen and incomprehensible. The notion of ‘realism’ in the aftermath of the war became substantially redefined, and there emerged a number of ‘realisms’ that differed from the positivist

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<sup>171</sup> John Middleton Murry, *God: Being an Introduction to the Science of Metabiology* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1929), pp. 16–17.

<sup>172</sup> John Middleton Murry, ‘The Sign-Seekers’, in John Middleton Murry, *The Evolution of an Intellectual* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1927), pp. 13–25 (pp. 15–16). In a similar vein, the critic Stephen Spender recalled how after the war ‘sensitive undergraduates worried a lot about what was “real”’. With hindsight, he explained: ‘looking back I can see that the concern with being “real” or “unreal” arose because we felt ourselves to be living in a contemporary reality from which we were somehow shut out by circumstances’ (p. 5). Stephen Spender, ‘Remembering Eliot’, *Encounter*, 24.4 (1965), pp. 3–13 (repr. in *T. S. Eliot: The Man and His Work*, ed. by Allen Tate (London: Chatto & Windus, 1967), pp. 38–64).

<sup>173</sup> Murry, ‘The Sign-Seekers’, pp. 19, 23.

<sup>174</sup> John Middleton Murry, ‘Realism’, in *The Evolution of an Intellectual*, pp. 99–114 (pp. 99, 111–112).

understanding of the term prevalent in the nineteenth century. These, as Schloesser observes, included surrealism, magical realism, social realism, and religious realism:

All these realisms attempted to combine, in a dialectical synthesis, both the positivist's observed world as well as something else unseen. These dialectical realisms promised the postwar epoch new possibilities: that the logical and linear world of our waking state is not the deepest truth of our lives (surrealism); that there are forces for change that escape both our observation and control (magical realism); that societal progress towards utopian equality is a real possibility (social realism).<sup>175</sup>

Together with these, Schloesser lists 'religious realism' that consisted in a synthesis of realism and broadly understood 'mystical thinking' that included 'supernaturalism, miracles, and the mysterious, as well as personal spirituality and orthodox religion'.<sup>176</sup> The turn to religious realism can be connected to the well-documented religious revival of the post-war years that produced a number of Christian intellectuals who sought to reconceptualise the relationship between Christianity and contemporary culture.<sup>177</sup> They published a number of literary works addressing the subject and participated in cultural, literary, and aesthetic debates. Many of these debates, engaging thinkers who aimed to forge a new synthesis, raised the fundamental question of the meaning of religious experience and its relation to aesthetic experience.

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<sup>175</sup> Schloesser, pp. 7–8.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 116–117.

<sup>177</sup> Several studies have been devoted to the wave of conversions of major literary and intellectual figures of the period to orthodox Christianity. See Ian Ker, *The Catholic Revival in English Literature, 1845–1961: Newman, Hopkins, Belloc, Chesterton, Greene, Waugh* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003); Adam Schwartz, *The Third Spring: G. K. Chesterton, Graham Greene, Christopher Dawson, and David Jones* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005); Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals Turn to Rome* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); and Joseph Pearce, *Literary Converts: Spiritual Inspiration in an Age of Unbelief* (London: HarperCollins, 1999). See also Schwartz's review of Pearce's book: 'Swords of Honor: The Revival of Orthodox Christianity in Twentieth-Century Britain', *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture*, 4.1 (2001), 11–33.

## Spaces of Encounter: Modernisms Theological and Literary

The question of how aesthetics is related to religion was addressed by a number of prominent thinkers across Europe, including Nicolai Berdyaev in Russia, Stanisław Brzozowski in Poland, Henri Bremond, Jacques Maritain, and Ramon Fernandez in France, and T. E. Hulme, T. S. Eliot, John Middleton Murry in Britain, to name just a few. They all, in one way or another, began with the premise that the existing representations of reality had proved insufficient, and needed to be revised so as to allow for the presence of the supernatural or metaphysical element. In their reflections on religion, they to a great extent followed in the footsteps of the pre-war Modernists and anti-Modernists, further developing some of their insights.<sup>178</sup> In the aftermath of the war's destruction, they attempted to rethink the meaning of artistic creation, and pointed to its religious dimension. They differed, however, in their understanding of the affinity between the aesthetic and the religious, with, for instance, Berdyaev and Bremond elevating the meaning of a creative act by emphasising the proximity of poetic and mystical experience, and Hulme and Maritain insisting that there is an unbridgeable gap between them and, thus, art must be subordinate to religion.<sup>179</sup>

The 1920s exchange between Bremond and Maritain, two Roman Catholic thinkers with radically divergent views on the relation between aesthetics and religion, whose works were soon translated into a number of European languages, is a particularly

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<sup>178</sup> I disagree here with Schloesser, who argues that the post-war 'reconception of the relationship between Catholicism and culture was a radical departure from the prewar epoch', in which religion and culture were considered 'two opposing forces irreconcilably set against one another' (p. 5). As I have demonstrated above, this was a view held by the anti-Modernist circles; those who sympathised with Modernism maintained that the reconciliation of Catholicism and contemporary culture was a real possibility.

<sup>179</sup> Hulme in 'Humanism and the Religious Attitude' introduced an additional classification, dividing reality into '(1) the inorganic world, of mathematical and physical science, (2) the organic world, dealt with by biology, psychology and history, and (3) the world of ethical and religious values' (p. 5). He posed 'an *absolute* division between each of the three regions' (p. 6). T. E. Hulme, 'Humanism and the Religious Attitude', in T. E. Hulme, *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. by Herbert Read, 2nd edn (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1936), pp. 1–72.

interesting example of how theological Modernism and neo-Thomism entered the literary and intellectual culture of the period. The questions posed by Bremond and Maritain in France travelled across the Channel, and featured prominently in Murry's *Adelphi* and Eliot's *Criterion*. The way in which Bremond's and Maritain's ideas came to play a prominent role in the literary and religious debate between Eliot and Murry, discussed in detail in chapter three, testifies to the cultural significance of issues raised by religious intellectuals of the period. Closer attention to these debates reveals an urgency with which the subject of the relation between aesthetics and metaphysics was approached.

While the Bremond–Maritain and Eliot–Murry debates serve as a good example of the numerous exchanges and interactions between theological Modernism and modernist aesthetics, the relationship between theological Modernism and modernist literature was not limited to such theoretical considerations. Issues related to the Modernist controversy were readily addressed by many European authors. Plots of numerous novels and plays were conceived around a conflict between a reform-minded devout believer who is convinced of the experiential and evolutionary character of Christian religion, the conservative religious environment in which he or she lives and works, and, optionally, the secular materialist culture. Two significant examples of such works are Antonio Fogazzaro's novel *Il Santo* and G. B. Shaw's play *Saint Joan*.<sup>180</sup>

Fogazzaro, a Catholic writer who firmly supported the reform of the Church, corresponded with numerous Catholic Modernists across Europe.<sup>181</sup> His novel, published in Italian in 1906, received an astonishing amount of attention, with English, French, German, and Dutch translations appearing in the same year, Hungarian, Spanish, and

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<sup>180</sup> Antonio Fogazzaro, *Il Santo* (Milano: Baldini, 1906). All references are to the English translation: *The Saint*, trans. by M. Prichard-Agnetti, 5th edn (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1906). George Bernard Shaw, *Saint Joan: A Chronicle Play in Six Scenes and an Epilogue* (London: Constable, 1924). Other relevant works, whose discussion exceeds the scope of this thesis, include Mary Ward's *The Case of Richard Meynell* (1911), Josephine Ward's *Out of due time* (1906), Artur Gruszecki's *Maryawita* (1912), and Antonio Fogazzaro's *Leila* (1910).

<sup>181</sup> See also Laura Wittman, 'Omnes velut aqua dilabimur: Antonio Fogazzaro, *The Saint*, and Catholic Modernism', in *Italian Modernism: Italian Culture between Decadentism and Avant-Garde*, ed. by Luca Somigli and Mario Moroni (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), pp. 130–166.

Portuguese in 1907, and Czech in 1911. One of the reasons for the novel's enormous popularity, as the English translator observes in her preface, was the fact that '[t]he censors of the Index have assured the widest circulation of this book, by condemning it as heretical'.<sup>182</sup> Thus, the book became 'the storm centre of religious and literary debate'.<sup>183</sup>

The saint from the title, Piero Maironi of Brescia, is a devout Catholic who comes to believe that if Catholicism is to survive, a movement of renewal needs to be initiated from within the Church. In the middle of the novel, he is received by the pope, and urges him to heal the 'four wounds' from which the Church is suffering: 'the spirit of falsehood', 'the spirit of clerical domination', 'the spirit of avarice', and 'the spirit of immovability'.<sup>184</sup> He describes the latter as the erroneous worship of the past in words strikingly similar to Tyrrell's, Loisy's, and other Modernists':

all the religious men [...] who to-day oppose progressive Catholicism, would, in all good faith, have caused Christ to be crucified in the name of Moses. They are worshippers of the past; they wish everything to remain immovable in the Church, [...] even to those senseless traditions which forbid a cardinal to go out on foot, and make it scandalous for him to visit the poor in their houses. It is the spirit of immovability which, by straining to preserve what it is impossible to preserve, exposes us to the derision of unbelievers; and this is a great sin in the sight of God.<sup>185</sup>

On hearing Maironi's diagnosis of the malaise afflicting the Church, the pope acknowledges the need for reform, yet at the same time adds that he is not the one who will begin it, as he is 'old', 'weary', and 'ill'.<sup>186</sup>

The enthusiasm with which the novel was received – it soon was considered 'the mouthpiece of the Christian Democrats, and indeed of all intelligent Catholics in Italy' –

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<sup>182</sup> M. Prichard-Agnetti, 'Introduction', in Fogazzaro, *The Saint*, pp. v-xviii (p. v).

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., pp. 281–291.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., p. 287.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., p. 291.

certainly had a political meaning.<sup>187</sup> In fact, the English translator compares the weight of the subject it addresses to the importance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, adding that placing the novel on the Index just a year before the papal condemnation of Modernism was issued 'can only add to its power', as it testifies to the accurateness of the diagnosis it put forward.<sup>188</sup>

The controversy that was provoked by the publication and staging of G. B. Shaw's *Saint Joan* seventeen years later proved that the issues raised by the Modernist crisis still bore much relevance to the post-war culture. Shaw's choice of Joan of Arc for the protagonist of his play was not accidental. Indeed, one could say that the fate of her sainthood was very closely intertwined with the events of the Modernist controversy. As Damon Franke aptly points out:

In a three-week period from 1903 to 1904, Pius X took the first steps both to declare modernism a heresy and Joan a saint. He placed Alfred Loisy's books on the Index of Forbidden Books, and declared Joan Venerable. From 1907 to 1908, further steps were taken: he officially condemned 'modernism' to be a heresy, and beatified Joan. Eventually, in 1920, Pope Benedict XV canonized her. Witnessing the Church turn to the medieval while ferreting out the modernist, a careful observer might begin to question the Church's relation to modernist heresies and the veiled politics behind canonization.<sup>189</sup>

Indeed, Shaw was one of such careful observers. In a long preface introducing *Saint Joan*, he provides a detailed historical background for the play, discusses various contemporary interpretations of Joan's actions and their historical significance, accounts for the ways in which her 'voices and visions' could be approached, and finally expresses his views on her previous biographers, as well as on the Catholic Church's stance with regard to her life and sainthood. Such an extensive discussion shows that Shaw had conducted extensive

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<sup>187</sup> Prichard-Agnetti, p. xv.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xv–xvi.

<sup>189</sup> Franke, pp. 121–122.

research and devoted considerable time to reflecting on the questions of heresy and orthodoxy before writing the play. Since 1911, he debated on those issues with G. K. Chesterton, and they both took turns to address the Cambridge Heretics Society on the topic.<sup>190</sup> The way in which Shaw presents Joan, who in her lifetime was considered both a hero and a heretic, and in 1431 was burnt at the stake, highlights the historical fluidity of the notion of heresy, and the manner in which it may verge on sainthood.<sup>191</sup>

In his preface, which he calls a ‘sober essay on facts’, Shaw makes a case for an open-minded interpretation of Joan’s visions, arguing that the notion of mysticism does not need to be necessarily ruled out:

The nineteenth century said that [the visions and voices] were delusions, but that as she was a pretty girl, and had been abominably ill-treated and finally done to death by a superstitious rabble of medieval priests hounded on by a corrupt political bishop, it must be assumed that she was the innocent dupe of these delusions. The twentieth century finds this explanation too vapidly commonplace, and demands something more mystic. I think the twentieth century is right, because an explanation which amounts to Joan being mentally defective instead of, as she obviously was, mentally excessive, will not wash.<sup>192</sup>

He defends Joan’s sanity, asserting that a historian who wants to arrive at a fair representation ‘must understand that visionaries are neither impostors nor lunatics’.<sup>193</sup> He mocks those who in their historical accounts excessively rationalise mystics’ experiences, reaching the conclusion that ‘St Teresa’s hormones had gone astray and left her incurably

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<sup>190</sup> G. B. Shaw spoke at the Cambridge Heretics Society meeting on ‘The Religion of the Future’ on 29 May 1911. G. K. Chesterton responded with a talk on ‘The Future of Religion’ on 17 November 1911; see Franke, p. 221. On the Society, see note 125 in this chapter.

<sup>191</sup> *Saint Joan* was first performed in New York in December 1923, and had as many as 213 performances in the United States and 244 in England. The success of the play could perhaps be connected to the enormous popularity of the cult of Joan of Arc during World War I. As Becker points out, her cult was much alive among soldiers of whom many ‘shared the youth of Joan’, and she was widely considered to offer ‘protection and consolation’ and to be ‘the bringer of victory’ (Becker, p. 79).

<sup>192</sup> Shaw, *Saint Joan*, p. xiv.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xv.

hyperpituitary or hyperadrenal or hysteroid or epileptoid or anything but asteroid'.<sup>194</sup> Shaw excludes the possibility that Joan suffered from insanity and discredits the claims that she was a heretic. Heresy, he argues, is a fluid concept whose interpretation changes with time. He observes that many saints, including Francis of Assisi and Clare, were in conflict with the ecclesiastical authorities of the day. In fact, Shaw asserts, 'Francis might have gone to the stake had he lived longer'.<sup>195</sup> The boundary between heresy and saintliness is not fixed, Shaw asserts, but fluctuating; 'all evolution in thought and conduct must at first appear as heresy and misconduct'.<sup>196</sup> Furthermore, since 'the law of God is a law of change', it follows that 'when the Churches set themselves against change as such, they are setting themselves against the law of God'.<sup>197</sup> According to Shaw, the churches must not only preach humility, but also practise it:

When the Church Militant behaves as if it were already the Church Triumphant, it makes these appalling blunders about Joan and Bruno and Galileo and the rest which make it so difficult for a Freethinker to join it; and a Church which has no place for Freethinkers: nay, which does not inculcate and encourage freethinking with a complete belief that thought, when really free, must by its own law take the path that leads to the Church's bosom, not only has no future in modern culture, but obviously has no faith in the valid science of its own tenets, and is guilty of heresy that theology and science are two different and opposite impulses, rivals for human allegiance.<sup>198</sup>

The immediate contemporary topicality of this accusation could hardly escape the attention of Shaw's audiences and readers. The fact that the play ends with an epilogue in which it is suggested that Joan would be executed also in contemporary times, as Franke observes, 'acutely estranged its orthodox audience'.<sup>199</sup> Eliot stated in the *Criterion* that

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid., p. xix.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., p. xxxvi.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., p. xlii.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., p. xliii.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., pp. xl-xli.

<sup>199</sup> Franke, p. 129.

Shaw's Joan was 'perhaps the greatest sacrilege of all Joans: for instead of the saint or the strumpet of legends to which he objects, he has turned her into a great middle-class reformer, and her place is a little higher than Mrs. Pankhurst'.<sup>200</sup> Eliot's response to Shaw's rewriting of the story was highly critical of Shaw's portrayal of Joan, as it deprived her of the characteristics attributed to her in traditional hagiographies. This illustrates yet another pressing theological issue of the period, namely, the question of how to reconceptualise the genre of hagiography so as to restore its relevance to modernity. Rewriting hagiography became of great interest to numerous modernist authors, and defined works such as Gertrude Stein's *Four Saints in Three Acts*, Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, G. K. Chesterton's *Saint Francis of Assisi* and, finally, Wittlin's poems and prose pieces featuring Francis of Assisi, which I discuss in detail in chapter four.<sup>201</sup>

While several scholars have discussed the way in which early-twentieth-century novels and dramas responded to the theological controversies of the period, the question of how contemporary poetry reacted to them has not yet been posed.<sup>202</sup> While the generic characteristics of prose and drama made them perhaps more readily capable of exploring the theological and socio-political intricacies of the Modernist controversies, poetic responses, it seems to me, were more subtle, complex and ambivalent. Hence, the scarcity

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<sup>200</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'A Commentary', *The Criterion*, 3.9 (October 1924), 1–5 (pp. 4–5). Eliot criticised the play again in a review of J. M. Robertson's book *Mr. Shaw and 'The Maid'*. He wrote: 'To Mr. Shaw, truth and falsehood (we speak without prejudice) do not seem to have the same meaning as to ordinary people. Hence the danger, with his 'St. Joan', of his deluding the numberless crowd of sentimentally religious people who are incapable of following any argument to a conclusion. Such people will be misled until they can be made to understand that the potent ju-ju of the Life Force is a gross superstition; and that (in particular) Mr. Shaw's 'St. Joan' is one of the most superstitious of the effigies which have been erected to that remarkable woman.' T. S. Eliot, 'Shaw, Robertson, and "The Maid": Review of *Mr. Shaw and "The Maid"* by J. M. Robertson', *The Criterion*, 4.2 (April 1926), 389–390 (p. 390). For a comparative discussion of Shaw's and Eliot's portrayal of saints in *Saint Joan* and *Murder in the Cathedral*, see Charles A. Berst, 'As Kingfishers Catch Fire: The Saints and Poetics of Shaw and T. S. Eliot', *Shaw*, 14 (1994), 105–125.

<sup>201</sup> A relevant discussion of Eliot's, Shaw's, Maurice Maeterlinck's, and Gertrude Stein's dramas featuring saints can be found in Jennifer Large Seagrave's 'Modern Saints' Plays: A History of The Genre' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, The University of Utah, August 2013) <<http://content.lib.utah.edu/cdm/ref/collection/etd3/id/2599>> [accessed 1 September 2014].

<sup>202</sup> See Cadegan, *All Good Books Are Catholic Books*, pp. 20–84; Schloesser, pp. 245–281; Fordham, pp. 17–21; and Topping, pp. 25–123. While Topping raises the question of how poetry responded to the Modernist crisis in theology, he does not aim to offer a detailed analysis of the issue, as he regards his own book as an attempt 'to pave the way for future work' (p. 1).

of research that would address this issue. The following three chapters offer case studies of Rilke's, Eliot's, and Wittlin's poetic engagement with contemporary theological issues concerning the relation of Christian tradition to the experience of modernity.

In his study of the concept of theological authorship, the theologian John E. Thiel presents Modernist theologians' attempts at rethinking the relationship between inherited dogma and lived experience as part of the tradition that can be traced back to Friedrich Schleiermacher, Johann Sebastian Drey, and John Henry Newman, and that was later continued by Henri de Lubac, Jean Danielou and the school of *nouvelle théologie* of the 1940s–1950s, to eventually gain institutional recognition within the Roman Catholic Church at the Second Vatican Council.<sup>203</sup> According to Thiel, all those thinkers advocated a theological method that was sustained by a dialectic between past tradition and present experience. Drey, a co-founder of the Catholic School of Tübingen, conceived of this dialectic as an interplay of two elements that are indispensable to Christian faith. He argued that a living tradition needs to be constantly developed through an interaction between its 'fixed aspect' and 'mobile aspect'.<sup>204</sup> Drey envisaged the theologian's task as *Nachkonstruieren*, a reconstructive interpretation and 'imaginative act' that depends on 'the freedom of the insightful mind to rescue the past from formulaic or merely factual understandings of its meaning'.<sup>205</sup> He argued that the theologian's 'creativity is not the product of fantasy but flourishes precisely in the renewal it brings to a tradition of meaning'.<sup>206</sup> Hence, an act of creative theological hermeneutics is twofold and consists of an empathetic exegesis of the past and its imaginative revision in the light of the present experience. The doctrinal tradition is renewed and saved from ossification through the

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<sup>203</sup> John E. Thiel, *Imagination and Authority: Theological Authorship in the Modern Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991). A similar thesis has been put forward by Jürgen Mettepenningen in his *Nouvelle Théologie - New Theology: Inheritor of Modernism, Precursor of Vatican II* (London: T & T Clark, 2010). See also Gerard Loughlin, 'Nouvelle Théologie: A Return to Modernism?', in *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology*, ed. by Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 36–50.

<sup>204</sup> Thiel, pp. 80–81.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*

theologian's imaginative discernment, whose direction, in turn, is guided by this very tradition. Such creative discernment ensures that the result of the reconstructive act will be relevant for the present-day faith community, while the hermeneutical empathy helps to secure its place within the tradition.

The Modernist controversies discussed in this chapter demonstrate that this dialectical interplay between the 'fixed' and 'mobile' aspects of a living tradition may produce considerable tension and lead to a situation in which orthodoxy becomes associated with only the 'fixed' element, while the 'mobile' element is denounced as heterodoxy or heresy. At such points theological creativity becomes stifled and the breadth of imaginative reconstruction is considerably limited. Rilke's, Eliot's, and Wittlin's works, when read against this context, show how in such moments poetry can become an alternative vehicle for creative theological hermeneutics. Their works, as the following chapters demonstrate, reveal a complex dialectic between medieval Christian doctrine and modernity, showing how the former can be opened to creatively embrace the latter, and how the latter can be assigned new interpretations in the light of the former. Rilke creatively approaches the Orthodox iconographic tradition, showing how the medieval icon forms, just like Cubist paintings, embrace multiple and diverse perspectives, and how a modern viewer-suppliant is invited to co-create their meaning. Eliot in a number of poems and essays explores the relationship between dogma and mystical experience, and devotes increasing attention to the way in which they are hermeneutically interdependent. Wittlin reconceptualises the medieval genre of hagiography, and in his poems and prose works poses a new ideal of socially engaged sainthood that responds to some of the formative experiences of twentieth-century modernity – the horrors of World War I and the violence of anti-Semitism. The fact that the three poets, while coming from different religious backgrounds and writing in different languages, carried out parallel poetic explorations of the relationship between elements of medieval Christian tradition and

modernity highlights the international and interdenominational scope of theological Modernism, and effectively demonstrates the existence of a complex network of interactions and exchanges between theological and cultural modernisms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

## Chapter 2

### The Ripening Dark God of Modernity:

#### The Orthodox Icon and Rainer Maria Rilke's 'The Book of Monastic Life'

'[O]ne would have to be blind not to believe in the salutariness of the icon's artistic effect, in their huge capacity to affect contemporary art and in their unexpected closeness to our times. Not only does any 14<sup>th</sup> century *Nicholas the Miracle Worker* or *Nativity of the Mother of God* help us understand Matisse, Picasso, Le Fauconnier or Goncharova; but through Matisse, Picasso, Le Fauconnier and Goncharova, we feel the great beauty of these Byzantine pictures much better, the fact that they have youth, power and animation.'

Alexander Benois, 'Icons and the New Art', 1913<sup>1</sup>

The question of how Christianity and modernity could be reconciled turned into fierce religious controversies in the first decades of the twentieth century, but the issues lying at their heart had begun growing in importance already in the late nineteenth century. Rilke's cycle 'Das Buch vom mönchischen Leben' ('The Book of Monastic Life'), written in 1899, is an example of an early literary response to the perceived need to reimagine Christianity's place in modernity. In this chapter, I demonstrate how Rilke consciously re-appropriates elements of the medieval theology of Orthodox Christianity to create a space where Christian tradition and modernity can mutually inspire each other.

The cycle, I suggest, probes into the facets of the Orthodox icon that allow for it to be reinterpreted as a form open to modern sensibility, that is, its polycentric and dynamic perspective and densely symbolic composition devoid of mimetic illusionism.

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Benois, 'Ikony i novoe iskusstvo' [Icons and the New Art] in *Rec'*, 5 April 1913, quoted in Andrew Spira, *The Avant-Garde Icon: Russian Avant-Garde Art and the Icon Painting Tradition* (Aldershot: Lund Humphries, 2008), pp. 121–123 (p. 121).

Rilke's exploration of these features of Orthodox iconography allows him to reclaim it as both a religious artefact and a work of art that allows, or even requires, an individual believer to co-create its meaning. Rilke's cycle, I argue, poetically foregrounds the icon's polycentric perspective and, like slightly later Cubist paintings, embraces multifocal vision that substantially differs from the single linear perspective commonly employed in Western painting. The God that emerges from Rilke's poems upsets traditional conceptual frameworks, refusing to be grasped in any single poetic vision. The only recurring image is that of darkness. It allows the speaker to distance himself from the received representations of the divine and experience a vision born in his personal encounter with God. This encounter, as several poems in the cycle suggest, may turn into a humiliating experience for a believer who is obsessed with the idea of pinning down and measuring God. For those, however, who are prepared to accept the limitations of their epistemological frameworks and embrace the paradoxical nature of God, the cycle suggests, it may become an ultimately rewarding and life-transforming experience.

Such a reading of Rilke's cycle differs from the approach of most critics in that it places his poetry in the context of contemporary debates about the role and meaning of medieval Christian traditions in modernity, as discussed in the previous chapter. Until now, critics have been highly ambivalent in their evaluation of the impact of Rilke's engagement with Christianity on his poetry, as demonstrated by debates occurring both in Rilke's biographies and critical discussions of his works. Biographical works have given considerable attention to Rilke's Catholic upbringing and the influence that his mother, Sophie Entz, had on his personal development. Ralph Freedman's *Life of a Poet: Rainer Maria Rilke*, recounting Rilke's formative years, focuses primarily on the bond between Rilke and his mother, and the years that Rilke spent in a Catholic school in Prague and a military school in St Pölten. According to Freedman, Rilke displayed 'the tendency toward

excessive piety that Phia [Sophie] had nurtured in him'.<sup>2</sup> When Freedman describes the four years that Rilke spent in the military school, where he was frequently bullied by his peers, he states that young Rilke bore all that with patience because '[m]artyrdom, too, was a game he had learned from his mother'.<sup>3</sup> This not unbiased judgement of the religious aspects of Rilke's upbringing and the destructive role that his mother's Catholic faith allegedly had on his future life is repeated by several other biographers.<sup>4</sup> It has been aptly addressed in a study of misogyny and mother-hatred in Rilke scholarship by Tineke Ritmeester, who calls for countering 'the misogynist practices in Rilke scholarship by introducing a revisionary interpretation from a feminist perspective' and weighing Sophie Rilke's experience of marriage, motherhood and divorce against the socio-historical context of the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Austria.<sup>5</sup> Despite some critics' claims that the atmosphere in which Rilke grew up was that of 'shallow, sentimental Catholicism',<sup>6</sup> one could argue the opposite, for instance, on the basis of the volume *Ephemeriden*, which, with Rilke's help, his mother published in 1900. The volume includes aphorisms speaking out against excessive conventionalisation of social life and religious hypocrisy, testifying to Sophie Rilke's large scope of readings and deep knowledge of the literary culture of her time. Among her aphorisms one finds examples of a critique of superficial religiosity ('How many women labour for the church, not out

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<sup>2</sup> Ralph Freedman, *Life of a Poet: Rainer Maria Rilke* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996), p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Freedman, pp. 16–17.

<sup>4</sup> Examples of such studies are numerous. For instance, Arnold Bauer in his study *Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. by Ursula Lamm (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1972) claimed that '[i]t can be safely assumed that Rilke's mother was unstable to the point of mental illness. She was a bigoted hypocrite, without religious depth, and she had assumed a role quite fashionable at the turn of the century: that of the misunderstood wife' (p. 8). More recently, Patricia Pollock Brodsky accused Sophie Rilke of 'shallow, sentimental Catholicism', adding: 'she went on numerous pilgrimages, and dragged little René along – dressed as a girl in lace and curls till his sixth year. With such associations, it is not surprising that Rilke renounced Christianity at the earliest opportunity'. 'Colored Glass and Mirrors: Life with Rilke,' in *A Companion to the Works of Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. by Erika A. Metzger and Michael M. Metzger (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2004), pp. 19–39 (p. 23).

<sup>5</sup> Tineke Ritmeester, 'Heterosexism, Misogyny, and Mother-Hatred in Rilke Scholarship: The Case of Sophie Rilke-Entz (1851–1931)', *Women in German Yearbook: Feminist Studies in German Literature & Culture*, 6 (1991), 63–81 (pp. 63–64).

<sup>6</sup> Brodsky, p. 23.

of piety, but simply because clericalism is today thought to be a sign of good breeding'), and clericalism ('If there were on earth nothing but church candles, what impenetrable darkness would reign in most regions').<sup>7</sup> Thus, it is easy to contest Freedman's and other critics' judgement that through his mother Rilke 'was administered a powerful potion of romantic religiosity', from which he later had to strive to liberate himself.<sup>8</sup>

Rilke's second encounter with the Christian faith took place when he was sent to the German Catholic school in 1882. The school, founded in 1752 by the Piarists, the oldest Catholic educational order, enjoyed a particularly high reputation and was attended by children of the most affluent families of Prague.<sup>9</sup> On his graduation in 1886, Rilke was sent to a military boarding school in Sankt Pölten, close to Vienna. The period he spent there he later recalled as a time of isolation and suffering, interspersed with periods of recurring illness. His religious feelings were met with lack of understanding and derision by his fellow-students.<sup>10</sup> After Sankt Pölten, Rilke attended an advanced military college in Mährisch-Weiskirchen, a commercial school in Linz, and later the German Carl Ferdinand University in Prague, where he studied law and philosophy, to finally leave for Munich in 1896. It was there that he met Lou Andreas-Salomé, a Russian-born writer and essayist, student of Sigmund Freud and one of the first female psychoanalysts, with whom Rilke began an intense relationship. She showed a strong interest in the studies of religion and religious experience, and in a number of articles commented on contemporary

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<sup>7</sup> Sophie Rilke, *Ephemeral Aphorisms*, ed. and trans. by Wolfgang Mieder and David Scrase (Riverside: Ariadne Press, 1998), pp. 64–65, 32–33. The volume also includes numerous aphorisms that affirm the central place of faith and prayer in the life of the Christian. Sophie Rilke writes, for instance, that 'The most fervent wish of the soul is prayer', and that 'It is most difficult to rise to the very peak of achievement – renunciation' (pp. 32–33, 60–61).

<sup>8</sup> Freedman, p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> Among the school's alumni were several writers and philosophers, including Max Brod, Felix Weltsch, and Franz Werfel. On Rilke's childhood in Prague, see George C. Schoolfield, *Young Rilke and His Time* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2009), esp. chapter 1: 'Vally, Hidigeigei, and Others', pp. 3–48.

<sup>10</sup> As Freedman recounts, when a classmate slapped Rilke in the face, he could reply with perfect composure: 'I suffer as Christ suffered, quietly and without complaint, and as you hit me I pray to our dear Lord that He will forgive you.' This would further intensify the bullying. See Freedman, pp. 16–17.

scholarship and theological debates in Germany.<sup>11</sup> After her relationship with Rilke came to an end, she remained one of his closest friends and correspondents.<sup>12</sup>

Rilke's fascination with Russia, which began during his relationship with Andreas-Salomé, who was born and brought up in Saint Petersburg and 'as a Russian writing in German [...] in a particularly good position to act as interpreter of Russia to the West', has received a great deal of attention in Rilke studies.<sup>13</sup> The direct literary outcome of Rilke's journeys to Russia was the volume of poetry *Das Stunden-Buch* (*The Book of Hours*). The critical reception of this collection has been mixed, and it still holds true that, as Paul de Man observed, '[c]ommentators agree neither on the meaning nor on the evaluation of *The Book of Hours*'.<sup>14</sup> Shortly after the volume was published, it became largely popular as a collection of devotional verse and Rilke started to be considered a kind of modern mystic. According to Ben Hutchinson, 'up to about 1930 he was seen almost exclusively as such, since [...] the propagation of his perceived "mystical" teachings [...] often obscured his technical poetical achievement'.<sup>15</sup> De Man goes even further, saying that Rilke 'did nothing to discourage' the myth of his being a mystic and

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<sup>11</sup> Lou Andreas-Salomé's papers written for various magazines and journals in the period when she met Rilke included 'Harnack und das Apostolikum' [Harnack and the Apostolic Creed, 1892], 'Von Ursprung des Christenthums' [On the Origin of Christianity, 1895], 'Aus der Geschichte Gottes' [From the History of God, 1897], 'Vom religiösen Affekt' [On the Religious Affect, 1898], 'Religion und Kultur' [Religion and Culture, 1898]. They have been recently reprinted in the volume Lou Andreas-Salomé, *Von der Bestie bis zum Gott: Aufsätze und Essays* [From the Beast to the God: Articles and Essays], 1: *Religion*, ed. by Hans-Rüdiger Schwab (Taching am See: MedienEdition Welsch, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Rilke's early years, see Freedman, pp. 5–72; and Donald Prater, *A Ringing Glass: The Life of Rainer Maria Rilke* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), pp. 1–88.

<sup>13</sup> The works on Rilke and Russia that merit the most attention are Patricia Pollock Brodsky, *Russia in the Works of Rainer Maria Rilke* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984); Daria A. Reshetylo-Rothe, *Rilke and Russia: A Re-Evaluation* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990); and Anna A. Tavis, *Rilke's Russia: A Cultural Encounter* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994). The quotation is from Brodsky, p. 19.

<sup>14</sup> Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 21.

<sup>15</sup> Ben Hutchinson, *Rilke's Poetics of Becoming* (London: Legenda, 2006), p. 60. For examples of early critical treatments of Rilke's religiosity, see Eva Wernick, *Die Religiosität des Stundenbuches von Rilke: Ein Vortrag* [The Religiosity of Rilke's *The Book of Hours*: A Lecture] (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1926); Simon Frank, 'Die Mystik von R. M. Rilke' [The Mysticism of Rilke], *Neophilologus*, 20 (1935), 97–113; and Albert Schäfer, *Die Gottesanschauung Rainer Maria Rilkes: Versuch einer Entwicklungsgeschichte* [Rainer Maria Rilke's View of God: An Attempt at a History of Development] (Würzburg: Konrad Triltsch, 1938).

spiritual healer, which began to surround his person and which is said to have left ‘extensive traces in Rilke studies’.<sup>16</sup> Since the 1960s, critics’ attention has shifted towards the appreciation of the formal poetic accomplishment of *The Book of Hours*. Many scholars who analysed the poetic form developed by Rilke tended either to directly question the genuineness of its thematic preoccupation with religion or to simply ignore it and focus only on the aesthetic dimension of religious ideas present in the volume.<sup>17</sup> After de Man stated in 1979 that ‘[t]he “God” that the poems circumscribe by a multitude of metaphors [...] is an attribute of their language, in itself devoid of semantic depth’,<sup>18</sup> it has become a commonplace to claim that the God of *The Book of Hours* is an aesthetic construct bereft of any religious or theological meaning. Thus, more recently, Patricia Pollock Brodsky has argued for reading *The Book of Hours* as ‘above all a poetic attempt at an aesthetics of worship, a religion of art’.<sup>19</sup> Anna A. Tavis has similarly asserted that ‘God served [Rilke] as an overarching metaphor for all art’.<sup>20</sup> Judith Ryan has claimed that despite the fact that the poems were ‘inspired by the spirituality Rilke believed he found in Russia, *The Book of Hours* in fact presents a heretical anti-mysticism. God becomes a metaphor, not for the creative act, but for the art object’.<sup>21</sup> Ben Hutchinson has suggested that the ‘devotional verse of the *Stunden-Buch*’ should be seen as a technical preoccupation with a development of a certain poetics rather than ‘a genuine affirmation

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<sup>16</sup> De Man, p. 21.

<sup>17</sup> Examples of such an approach may be found in the works of critics who investigated the presence of Christian imagery in Rilke’s poems, for instance, Werner Kohlschmidt and Heinrich Imhof. The former argues for recognising the primarily aesthetic nature of God in Rilke’s poems, whereas the latter places the God one encounters in Rilke’s poetry within the context of psychoanalysis, reducing him to a product of the poet’s subconscious. Werner Kohlschmidt, ‘Die große Säkularisierung: Zu Rilkes Umgang mit dem Worte “Gott”’ [The Great Secularisation: On Rilke’s Treatment of the Word ‘God’], in *Sprache und Bekenntnis: Festschrift für Hermann Kunisch* [Language and Creed: Festschrift for Hermann Kunisch], ed. by Wolfgang Frühwald and Günter Niggel (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1971), pp. 335–347; Heinrich Imhof, *Rilkes “Gott”: R. M. Rilkes Gottesbild als Spiegelung des Unbewussten* [Rilke’s ‘God’: R. M. Rilke’s Image of God as a Reflection of the Unconscious] (Heidelberg: Stiehm, 1983).

<sup>18</sup> De Man, p. 31.

<sup>19</sup> Brodsky, *Russia in the Works of Rainer Maria Rilke*, pp. 59–60.

<sup>20</sup> Tavis, p. xiii.

<sup>21</sup> Judith Ryan, *Rilke, Modernism and Poetic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 28.

of piety.’<sup>22</sup> Finally, Johannes Wich-Schwarz has linked the renewal of language present in Rilke’s poetry to his attempt to reinvent the notion of God, which Wich-Schwarz interprets as a ‘therapeutic impulse [...] to confront, in the creative realm, the traumatic experiences with Christianity and thereby to ultimately undo its harmful influence on him’.<sup>23</sup>

From this brief overview it is clear that the approaches to *The Book of Hours* and its relation to Christianity have varied significantly. However, as Aris Fioretos noted, ‘surprisingly few attempts have been made to approach Rilke’s poems through a consideration of the interaction between rhetorical and thematic dimensions’.<sup>24</sup> Even when some critics seem to briefly reflect on the possibility of acknowledging the relevance of a religious reading of *The Book of Hours*, they tend to discard this idea in one or two sentences, without much further consideration. Thus, in major critical works one encounters remarks that *The Book of Hours* consist of ‘quasi-theological explorations of the nature and existence of God and (in conjunction) the self’,<sup>25</sup> or that it is ‘quite remote from conventional theology’ and ‘presents a heretical anti-mysticism’.<sup>26</sup> However, the terms such as ‘conventional theology,’ ‘pseudo-theology,’ or ‘anti-mysticism,’ are not explained and, thus, it is not clear to what exactly they are meant to refer. In fact, some of these terms seem to have been employed in order to avoid any in-depth discussion of the religious and theological dimensions of the cycle. It seems to me that what has prevented critics from considering both of these dimensions is the doubt verbalised by Hutchinson:

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<sup>22</sup> Hutchinson, p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> Johannes Wich-Schwarz, *Transformation of Language and Religion in Rainer Maria Rilke* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), p. 9.

<sup>24</sup> Aris Fioretos, ‘Prayer and Ignorance in Rilke’s “Buch vom mönchischen Leben”’, *Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, 65.4 (1990), 171–177 (p. 177). Notable among such attempts are Mark S. Burrows’s exploration of the relationship between the language of Rilke’s poetry and that of the apophatic theology in ‘At the Boundary of Imagination: Rainer Maria Rilke and the Poetics of Theological Negation’, *Studies in Spirituality* 10 (2000), 33–50; and Jennifer S. Cushman’s paper, which ‘[i]n spite of the widespread opinion that religious concerns preclude avant-garde engagement, [argues] that it was precisely the spirituality of Rainer Maria Rilke that produced an avant-garde moment in his art’. Jennifer S. Cushman, ‘The Avant-Garde Rilke: Russian (Un)Orthodoxy and the Visual Arts’, in *Unreading Rilke*, pp. 137–148 (p. 138).

<sup>25</sup> Robert Vilain, ‘Rilke the Reader’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Rilke*, ed. by Karen Leeder and Robert Vilain (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 131–144 (p. 136).

<sup>26</sup> Ryan, *Rilke, Modernism and Poetic Tradition*, pp. 28–30.

‘the exact status of Rilke’s religious beliefs [...] remains problematic: did he really believe in this Russian “God of becoming,” or was it rather a vehicle for poetic expression, for the narcissism typical of the young poet?’<sup>27</sup> It is not immediately obvious, however, why literary critics should be concerned with the exact status of Rilke’s religious beliefs. Any such claims almost always remain in the realm of speculation and more often than not constrain interpretation. They are based on the assumption that it is possible to trace a direct and unequivocal correlation between authors’ lives and the content of their works. However, as Jean Ward argues, this is a very contentious claim, and ‘[t]heoretically [...] it would be possible for a poet who is personally indifferent to Christianity to produce work demonstrating the same characteristics [as works of poets who are Christians] and thus to be a Christian poet’.<sup>28</sup> It seems to me that *The Book of Hours* can be read as Christian poetry not because Rilke possibly believed in the God of Russian Orthodoxy, but because the volume clearly emerges from the medieval traditions of the liturgy of hours and of Orthodox icon-veneration, and it abounds in Christian references and imagery. Denying the poems any religious depth because of uncertainty about Rilke’s personal beliefs is not justified as, I argue, the religious and aesthetic dimensions of his cycle are closely interconnected.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ben Hutchinson, ‘Introduction’, in *Rainer Maria Rilke’s The Book of Hours: A New Translation with Commentary*, trans. by Susan Ranson, ed. by Ben Hutchinson (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2012), pp. xi–xxxiv (p. xx).

<sup>28</sup> Jean Ward, *Christian Poetry in the Post-Christian Day: Geoffrey Hill, R. S. Thomas, Elizabeth Jennings* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> Further evidence for Rilke’s extensive interest in religious thinking can be found in the scope of his reading on different religions and spirituality. Due to his mother’s appreciation of literature, Rilke learned to read in German before he went to school, and a few years later became fluent in French. Among the readings that shaped his religious sensibility, one can list the Bible and various apocryphal texts, Jacob of Voragine’s *The Golden Legend*, the hagiographies by Pedro de Ribadeneira, Angela of Foligno’s *Book of Visions and Instructions*, St Augustine’s *Confessions*, St John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart, Teresa of Avila and Catherine of Siena. Rilke’s engagement with religious thinking was also reflected in the interest he showed in visiting places of religious significance during his travels. As Paul Bishop observes: ‘On his visit to Algiers and Tunisia in 1910, Rilke was impressed by the Christian and the Islamic culture of North Africa, recalling in Tunis that the birthplace of St Augustine was nearby, and he tried to translate part of Augustine’s *Confessions*. In Kairouan, he was moved by the presence of Mohammad, and his interest in Islam was – like Goethe’s – intense.’ Paul Bishop, ‘Rilke: Thought and Mysticism’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Rilke*, pp. 159–173 (p. 161). See also Vilain, ‘Rilke the Reader’.

In this chapter, I aim to explore selected poems from *The Book of Hours* in the context of the religious landscape in which they originated, emphasising the medieval Christian traditions from which Rilke drew inspiration. All the poems discussed come from the cycle that Rilke originally called ‘Prayers’ (‘Die Gebete’), written between 20 September–14 October 1899. In 1905, Rilke included these poems in the volume *The Book of Hours*, together with two later cycles, ‘The Book of Pilgrimage’ (‘Das Buch von der Pilgerschaft’) written between 18–25 September 1901, and ‘The Book of Poverty and Death’ (‘Das Buch von der Armut and vom Tode’), composed between 23 March–28 April 1903.<sup>30</sup> While preparing the first cycle for publication, Rilke changed its title from ‘Prayers’ to ‘The Book of Monastic Life’ (‘Das Buch vom mönchischen Leben’). He also introduced some changes in the structure of the cycle: he decided to remove two of the poems as well as the prose notes that in the first manuscript provided a framework for the entire cycle, making connections between particular poems more explicit.<sup>31</sup>

In the first section of the chapter, I discuss Rilke’s journey to Russia and the interest he developed in the Orthodox icon, which comes to the fore in his essay on Russian art and a number of poems from the cycle. Subsequently, I focus on the ways in which Rilke’s cycle poetically foregrounds several aspects of Orthodox iconography that could be considered ‘modern’ from contemporary perspective – its polycentric and dynamic perspective, its endorsement of the darkness of God, whose image needs to be constantly revised, and its open composition that invites the viewer-suppliant to co-create its

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<sup>30</sup> Schoolfield, pp. xxi–xxix.

<sup>31</sup> The manuscript with the original prose notes (the so-called Manuscript A) was published for the first time in 1937 in *Rainer Maria Rilkes Stunden-Buch* [Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Book of Hours*], ed. by Ruth Mövius (Leipzig: Insel, 1937), and later reprinted in Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sämtliche Werke* [Complete Works], ed. by Rilke-Archiv, Ruth Sieber-Rilke, and Ernst Zinn, 6 vols (Wiesbaden: Insel, 1955–1966), III: *Jugengedichte* [Early Poetry] (1959), pp. 305–373. All German quotations are from this edition. For a detailed discussion of the changes that Rilke made to the original composition when preparing it for publication, see Reshetylo-Rothe, *Rilke and Russia*, pp. 110–112. The only English edition that retains the prose notes, which are important to my reading of the cycle, is the recently published translation by Mark S. Burrows. Hence, all quotations in English and the numbering of the poems are based on his edition: Rainer Maria Rilke, *Prayers of a Young Poet*, trans. by Mark S. Burrows (Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2013).

meaning. It is my contention that Rilke's cycle, if read within its historical context, offers a poetic response to the increasingly pressing contemporary question of the relation of Christianity and modernity.

### **Rilke's Russian Experience**

Many years after his two journeys to Russia, Rilke still frequently returned to them in his reminiscences, describing his Russian experience as a formative moment in his spiritual life and an inspiration for his cycle 'The Book of Monastic Life'. Having first arrived in Moscow with Lou Andreas-Salomé and her husband, Friedrich Carl Andreas, orientalist and linguist, on Maundy Thursday (27 April) 1899, Rilke was given an opportunity to witness the Orthodox celebrations of Easter. The imposing Dormition Cathedral (*Uspensky sobor*) in the Kremlin made a deep impression on him:

In the dusk, the giant outlines of the church projected straight into the sky and to its sides, in the fog; there were two silver chapels. On their steps, pilgrims awaited the opening of the doors. This sight so unusual for me shook me to the depth of my soul: for the first time in my life I had an inexpressible feeling, something like a feeling of home – I felt strongly that I belonged to something, my God, to something in this world.<sup>32</sup>

In his later conversations and letters, Rilke often recalled the profound bond he felt with Russia, which he came to call his 'spiritual home'.<sup>33</sup> What Rilke considered his ultimate

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<sup>32</sup> Witold Hulewicz, 'Gespräche mit Rainer Maria Rilke' [Conversations with Rainer Maria Rilke], *Prager Presse* [Prague Press], 30 November 1924, quoted in Tavis, p. 20.

<sup>33</sup> Rilke uses the phrase 'spiritual home' in his description of Russia included in a letter to his former instructor at St Pölten school. See 'Letter to General-Major V. Sedlakowitz, 9 December 1920', in Rainer Maria Rilke, *Selected Letters: 1902–1926*, trans. by R. F. C. Hull (London: Quartet Books, 1988), pp. 311–315 (p. 313). The theme of Russia as a place of spiritual belonging recurs frequently in Rilke's correspondence. In a 1904 letter to the Hungarian writer Arthur Holitscher, Rilke thus contrasts Russia with Western Europe: 'London I imagine to be something very harrowing. You know my fear

spiritual experience took place on the night of the Easter Vigil, when together with his two fellow travellers, he attended Easter services in the Dormition Cathedral. A few years later, he recalled that night in a letter to Andreas-Salomé:

Only once have I truly experienced Easter: it was that long, unusual, strange, exciting night when all the people pressed upon us and Иванъ Великій [Ivan the Great, the famous bell] pounded on me in the darkness, blow upon blow. That was my Easter and I believe it will suffice for the rest of my life. The message was delivered to me on that Moscow night in a strangely grand way, delivered into my blood and into my heart. I know it now: Христосъ воскресъ!<sup>34</sup>

In his description of the event, Rilke leaves the Paschal greeting ‘Christ is risen!’ in Russian, emphasising the fact that his spiritual experience was inextricably connected to the Russian setting in which it took place. It is yet another sign of his fascination with Orthodox Christianity, developed when he was preparing for the journey together with Andreas-Salomé, spending months immersed in the study of Russian history, culture, art and literature.<sup>35</sup> He learnt the basics of the Russian language and took a special interest in Orthodox iconography, which comes to the fore in ‘The Book of Monastic Life’.

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of the very big cities; also I shall never again go further west, as everything calls me back to Russia. If ever anything like a home could be given me somewhere, it would be there, in that great, grievous land’. Rilke, ‘Letter to Arthur Holitscher, 17 August 1904’, in *Selected Letters: 1902–1926*, p. 74.

<sup>34</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, ‘Letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé, 31 March 1904’, in Rainer Maria Rilke and Lou Andreas-Salomé, *Briefwechsel* [Correspondence], ed. by Ernst Pfeiffer (Wiesbaden: Insel Verlag, 1952), pp. 139–141 (pp. 139–140).

<sup>35</sup> Among the books which Rilke studied, Brodsky lists (pp. 212–213, n. 21): Ivan Zabelin’s *Domašnyj byt russkix carej v XVI-XVII stoletijax* [The Domestic Life of Russian Tsars in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, 1862], Nikolay Karamzin’s *Istorija gosudarstva Rossijskago* [History of the Russian State, 1816–1826], William R. S. Ralston’s *The Songs of the Russian People* (1872), ballads and verse tales compiled by Pavel N. Rybnikov (*Pesni sobrannye P. N. Rybnikovym* [Songs Collected by P. N. Rybnikov, 1861–1867]) and Russian folktales and fairy tales published by Alexander Afanasev as *Narodnye russkie skazki* [Russian Fairy Tales, 1855–1863]. Literary histories that Rilke read included Alfred Rambaud’s *La Russie Épique: Étude sur les chansons héroïques de la Russie* [The Epic Russia: Study of the Heroic Poetry of Russia, 1876], Nina Hoffmann’s *Th. M. Dostojevsky: Eine biographische Studie* [Th. M. Dostoyevsky: A Biographical Study, 1899], and Eugène-Melchior de Vogüé’s *Le roman russe* [The Russian Novel, 1886]. Finally, the art books with which he became familiar were O. P. Novytskyi’s *Istorija russkago iskusstva s drevnejšix vremen* [The History of Russian Art from the Ancient Times] and Petr Petrovič Gnedič’s *Istorija Iskusstv* [History of Art, 1885]. Regarding Russian literature, Rilke valued especially Pushkin and nineteenth-century writers; he was familiar with works by Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Gogol, Chekhov and Lermontov. For an extensive discussion of Rilke as a reader, see also Vilain, ‘Rilke the Reader’.

The cycle consists of sixty-eight poems that are connected by the figure of the speaker – a Russian monk who is also an icon-painter and a poet. As the final title of the volume in which the cycle was published, *The Book of Hours*, suggests, the poems can well be read as poetic prayers that are an inherent part of monastic life. The prose notes that connected the poems in the first manuscript (and were removed by Rilke before the publication) gave a composition date for each of the poems and often offered an additional insight into the circumstances in which the monk uttered or recorded it. Some of the poems were presented as visions and dreams that came to him during prayer or in sleep, while others were his reflections on his relationship with God, his icon-painting, and the future of the Christian faith in modernity.

In the opening poem of the cycle, the ringing of bells, reminiscent of Rilke's experience in Moscow, transports the speaker into a distinct dimension of temporality – that of prayer. The poem establishes the identity of the speaker as somebody who is clearly aware of and reflective about his place within tradition, which he is ready to actively shape:

The hour bows down and stirs me  
with a clear and ringing stroke;  
my senses tremble. I feel that I can –  
and I seize the forming day.

Nothing was yet done before I beheld it,  
and every becoming stood still;  
my ways of seeing are ripe, and, like a bride,  
to each one comes the thing each wills.

Nothing is too small for me, and I love it anyway  
and paint it on the golden base and large –  
and hold it high; and I don't know *whose*  
soul this might yet free...<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Rilke, '[Poem 1]', in *Prayers of a Young Poet*, p. 35. 'Da neigt sich die Stunde und rührt mich an | mit klarem, metallischem Schlag: | mit zittern die Sinne. Ich fühle: ich kann – | und ich fasse den plastischen Tag. || Nichts war noch vollendet, eh ich es erschaut, | ein jedes Werden stand still. | Meine

The poem presents a meeting of two types of ‘hours’: what Hutchinson calls the profane hours of the everyday and the sanctified moments of prayer, which enhance the speaker’s agency and inspire his icon-painting.<sup>37</sup> The clear sound of the bell ringing, emphasised by the consonance ‘mit klarem, metallenen Schlag’ (‘with a clear and ringing stroke’), brings about a feeling of anticipation, and makes the speaker wakeful and alert. The image of his trembling senses further emphasises the sense of expectancy. In the first sentence of the poem the speaker is a passive recipient of the event, he can only record his own emotional and bodily reactions. This is emphasised by the grammar of the poem, which places the personal pronoun ‘I’ (‘ich’) in the subordinate position in the German phrases: ‘rührt *mich* an’ and ‘*mir* zittern die Sinne’, underscoring the fact that the speaker’s agency is temporarily suspended and that something beyond his control is taking place.

The second sentence of the poem begins with a full restoration of the speaker’s agency: ‘I feel that I can’. The fact that the third line ends with these words and is followed by a dash that creates a space for the words to resound, turns them into a powerful affirmation of the speaker’s regained ability to act. The speaker’s newly restored sense of agency is confirmed in the following line, in which he assumes authority over temporality. The statement ‘I seize the forming day’ recalls the notion of the book of hours as a set of prayers whose purpose is to sanctify the day from sunrise to sunset – the prayers can be perceived as a means through which one can ‘seize’ the day and give it a certain form within a liturgical framework. The regularly re-enacted experience of prayer becomes part of the monk’s everyday reality and ultimately opens him up to a renewed perception of the world – the ‘ripe’ ways of seeing – that is conveyed in the following two stanzas.

The most noticeable feature of the renewed vision is the affection with which the speaker relates to the world. The things at which the speaker looks come to him ‘like a

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Blicke sind reif, und wie eine Braut | kommt jedem das Ding, das er will. || Nichts ist mir zu klein und ich lieb es trotzdem | und mal es auf Goldgrund und groß, | und halte es hoch, und ich weiß nicht wem, | lost es die Seele los...’ Rilke, ‘Die Gebete’, p. 307.

<sup>37</sup> Hutchinson, p. 70.

bride', as if they had been waiting for his loving look that, like the final brush stroke, can complete their process of becoming, which until now seems to have been suspended ('stood still'). The speaker, in his turn, reciprocates their affection, asserting: 'Nothing is too small for me, and I love it anyway'. In the next verse, we see him undertaking the task of transforming his vision into an icon on which he paints the things that came to him 'on the golden base and large'. In the Orthodox iconographic tradition, applying gold leaf to the icon's background and painting small things in larger size symbolically indicate the change that takes place when the human and the divine meet.<sup>38</sup> The colour symbolism is meant to give the viewer a glimpse into the divine reality and depict the transfiguration that the world will have undergone. Hence, one could argue that the vision the monk-speaker experiences in the poem is of a transcendent dimension. He reciprocates the loving approach of things with the loving stroke of his brush that brings about their transfiguration.

The final turn of the poem points towards the future. Affirming the grandeur of the transfigured reality through his icon-painting, the speaker expresses hope that his work may nourish the souls of those who will view it in the future. Thus, it is possible to say that the movement of the whole poem is characterised by a certain circularity: the monk who has been affected and touched through prayer paints an icon that is capable of touching other people, opening them up to the divine in a similar fashion. By the end of the poem, the linguistic prayer (the poem) and the visual one (the icon-painting) become closely united and, in accordance with the Orthodox tradition, the icon becomes 'both the way and the means; [a] prayer itself'.<sup>39</sup> It is a way of prayer for the monk, who through his work is able to express his love for the things he sees, and a possible means of prayer for those who will look at it once it has been finished. The two medieval traditions of

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<sup>38</sup> Leonid Ouspensky, 'The Meaning and Language of Icons', in Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, trans. by G. E. H. Palmer and E. Kadloubovsky, rev. edn (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1994), pp. 23–50 (p. 38).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

prayer that the poem points to – the liturgy of hours and icon-painting and veneration – are crucial sites of negotiation between traditional Christianity and modernity throughout the entire cycle.

### **The Orthodox Icon and Avant-Garde Art**

Rilke's encounter with the Orthodox icon and his fascination with both its aesthetics and spirituality coincided with a growing interest in medieval icons among late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Russian ethnographers, historians and artists. Until the mid-nineteenth century, the Orthodox icon-veneration had been considered a sign of backwardness and superstition among the Russian intelligentsia.<sup>40</sup> At the turn of the century, however, the icon was rediscovered as an object both of artistic and historical value, and of spiritual import.<sup>41</sup> A number of prominent art historians undertook extensive restoration projects under the patronage of Tsar Nicholas II, who hoped to present the newly discovered Orthodox icon as evidence for the ancient heritage and integrity of Russian national identity.<sup>42</sup> The restored icons were displayed at several exhibitions of old Russian art, and subsequently brought to the attention of Western public, with a special

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<sup>40</sup> See Shirley Glade, 'A Heritage Discovered Anew: Russia's Reevaluation of Pre-Petrine Icons in the Late Tsarist and Early Soviet Periods', *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, 26 (1992), 145–195.

<sup>41</sup> For a comprehensive account of the changing perception of medieval iconography and the restoration projects undertaken at the beginning of the twentieth century, see Robert L. Nichols, 'The Icon and the Machine in Russia's Religious Renaissance, 1900–1909', in *Christianity and the Arts in Russia*, ed. by William Brumfield and Milos Velimirovic (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 131–144.

<sup>42</sup> See Glade, pp. 151–152. As Spira observes, 'the serious and systematic collecting of icons was closely connected with the desire to create a museum of Russian art. [...] Best known among the earliest collectors of icons was Pavel Tretyakov (1832–98), whose comprehensive collection of Russian art became the corner-stone of the Tretyakov Gallery' (Spira, pp. 30–31).

collection of icons presented at the Russian Art Exhibition at the 1906 Salon d'Automne in Paris.<sup>43</sup>

Rilke's fascination with the medieval tradition of icon painting was, thus, shared by many of his Russian contemporaries; the atmosphere of excitement and discovery that accompanied the extensive restoration projects became a source of inspiration for a number of Russian artists and poets.<sup>44</sup> Painters such as Wassily Kandinsky, Natalia Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov, Marc Chagall, and Kazimir Malevich explored the icon's rules of composition and technique, experimenting with selected elements of traditional iconography into their own works. The medieval icon, as Jefferson Gatrall observes, became for them 'a modernist prism for seeing the world anew'.<sup>45</sup> For many artists the world seen through this prism differed significantly from that found in Western painting. The aspects of the Orthodox icon that avant-garde painters found particularly inspiring included flat forms, strong angular line, bold monochromatic colours, and lack of perspectival vision that creates the conventional illusory sense of space. They also experimented with the iconic composition and its use of geometrical shapes. Thus, the icon became a source of inspiration for avant-garde artists who tried to find new aesthetic modes of engaging with the world of modernity.

One of the serious aesthetic challenges that both Rilke and avant-garde painters creatively responded to was the question of how to account for the changing understanding

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<sup>43</sup> Among the exhibits were thirty-six fifteenth-to-seventeenth-century icons from the collection of Nicolay Likhachev, one of the most prominent Russian art collectors at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. See Spira, p. 54.

<sup>44</sup> For a discussion of the attitude of avant-garde artists to the Orthodox icon, see John E. Bowlit, 'Orthodoxy and the Avant-Garde: Sacred Images in the Work of Goncharova, Malevich, and Their Contemporaries', in *Christianity and the Arts in Russia*, pp. 145–150; and Spira, *The Avant-Garde Icon*. On the presence of the Orthodox icon in Russian avant-garde poetry, see Sarah Pratt, 'Avant-Garde Poets and Imagined Icons', in *Alter Icons: The Russian Icon and Modernity*, ed. by Jefferson J. A. Gatrall and Douglas Greenfield (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), pp. 173–190.

<sup>45</sup> Jefferson J. A. Gatrall, 'Introduction', in *Alter Icons*, pp. 1–25 (p. 3). In a similar vein, Pratt observes: 'Given the backward-looking nature of the icon and the thoroughgoing anachronisms of the Orthodox Church, we would expect the icon to be among the first objects cast overboard from the Steamship of Modernity. And yet, the artistic avant-garde unabashedly exploited the vocabulary of the icon, as can be seen in the works of Filonov, Larionov, Goncharova, Petrov-Vodkin, and Malevich, among others' (p. 174).

of space.<sup>46</sup> The discovery of electromagnetism, radioactivity, the electron, and the birth of quantum physics all in different ways drew attention to the invisible dimensions of the material world and, as Stephen Kern observes, ‘challenged the popular notion that [space] was homogeneous and argued for its heterogeneity’.<sup>47</sup> New scientific modes of conceptualising space were reflected in the artists’ rejection of mimetic naturalism and creative, experimental re-imaginings of spatiality, which, for the Russian avant-garde, was to a large degree informed by the rediscovery of the Orthodox icon and its peculiar composition technique. This experimentation with new ways of depicting space is evident in Goncharova’s *Annunciation* (figure 3), whose composition corresponds to that of the medieval icons of the Annunciation (figure 4). The draperies are painted with a predominantly angular, broken line. Their colour creates a vision of light-filled, supernaturally bright figures of Mary and Archangel Gabriel. The painting rejects perspectival vision and uses the colour-scale that is central to the medieval icon. The architectural elements are flat and rest against a monochromatic, impenetrably dark background, which further underscores the extraordinary luminosity of Mary and Gabriel. A similar experimentation with dark and light imagery, as I show later, is of prime importance in Rilke’s poetic cycle.

Despite this widespread admiration of icons among Russian avant-garde artists, in the West their appeal was much more limited; Rilke’s interest in the icon came several years before it drew the Western audience’s attention and before the major restoration projects were carried out.<sup>48</sup> His appropriation of a number of iconic motifs, thus, was

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<sup>46</sup> On Rilke’s preoccupation with spatial thinking, see Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei, ‘Interstitial Space in Rilke’s Short Prose Works’, *German Quarterly*, 80.3 (2007), 302–324.

<sup>47</sup> Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 132.

<sup>48</sup> The Orthodox icon began featuring prominently in Russian literature since the publication of Nikolai Leskov’s story *The Sealed Angel* (1873), in which the process of traditional icon-painting and veneration is described in much detail. As Spira observes, Leskov’s treatment of the icon not only did inspire other authors to follow in his steps, but also ‘made a significant contribution to the revival of interest in icons among the general public’ (p. 30). Rilke was familiar with Andreas-Salomé’s article on Leskov and his fascination with the Orthodox icon: Lou Andreas-Salomé, ‘Das russische Heiligenbild und sein Dichter’ [The Russian Holy Image and Its Poet], *Vossische Zeitung* [Voss Newspaper], 1 January 1898.

highly idiosyncratic. While preparing for his first journey to Russia, Rilke studied Russian art history and Orthodox iconography. In a letter to Helene Voronin, a Russian friend, written in summer 1899, he speaks of having studied all kinds of Russian maps, icons of saints, and the depictions of Christ and Madonna in the Russian Church, adding that he had learnt how to distinguish the image of the Virgin of Vladimir from that of Smolensk.<sup>49</sup> When in Russia, he purchased several icons, and on his return to Germany, decorated his study with them, creating his own version of the Orthodox devotional corner (Russian *красный угол* [*krasnyi ugol*] – ‘red corner’ or ‘beautiful corner’).<sup>50</sup> On his return from Russia, Rilke was so impressed with the icons he saw that he wrote the essay ‘Russische Kunst’ (‘Russian Art’), in which he explores the aesthetic and spiritual features of icons, drawing heavily on the theology of the icon and effectively merging it with his personal reflections on the icon’s place and role in the contemporary world.<sup>51</sup>

Rilke’s interest in the religious dimension of the icon was shared by prominent Russian avant-garde artists. Icons appealed to avant-garde painters who were attracted to abstractionism, like Malevich, because – designed as objects of contemplation – ‘they tended to have a minimum of narrative and symbolic content’.<sup>52</sup> Other artists, like Chagall and Kandinsky, devoted to experimentation with colour range, explored the spiritual principles of the icon’s colour symbolism. Chagall wrote that his ‘heart was rested by the icons’, and on seeing Andrei Rublev’s works in the Alexander III Museum in St Petersburg

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<sup>49</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, ‘Letter to Helene, 9 June 1899’, in Vladimir Boutchik, E. L. Stahl, Stanley Mitchell ‘Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke to Helene \*\*\* [Voronin]’, *Oxford Slavonic Papers*, 9 (1960), 129–164 (p. 155).

<sup>50</sup> Another of Rilke’s purchases was a crafted seventeenth-century silver cross that was previously owned by a Russian nobleman. Tavis offers its detailed description: ‘The name of the original cross’s owner was engraved on the reverse side, and the face of the cross was inlaid with miniature plates, the ancestral seals. Every seal portrayed a scene from Christ’s passion in the style of an old Russian icon’ (p. 37). Rilke describes his devotional corner in a letter to Helene Voronin of 17 September 1899: ‘Aus Kästchen, Kreuzen, Bildern fügt sich so allmählich eine fromme russische Ecke in meinem Arbeitszimmer; und von da aus soll russische Art es immer breiter überfluten’ [In my study, a pious Russian corner has been gradually created from chests, crosses, and images; and from there all things Russian should always flow into and fill my room]. *Ibid.*, pp. 160–161 (p. 161).

<sup>51</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, ‘Russische Kunst’ [Russian Art], in Rainer Maria Rilke, *Werke* [Works], ed. by Manfred Engel and others, 4 vols (Frankfurt am Mein: Insel Verlag, 1996), iv: *Schriften* [Prose Writings], ed. by Horst Nalewski, pp. 152–160 (first published in *Die Zeit*, 19 October 1901).

<sup>52</sup> Spira, p. 78.

he was ‘born to the mystical and religious’.<sup>53</sup> Kandinsky eventually produced his own theory of art that emphasised the spiritual meaning of colour and composition. In his manifesto *Über das Geistige in der Kunst (Concerning the Spiritual in Art, 1911)*, he argued that contemporary art can become one of the vehicles of the upcoming ‘spiritual revolution’:

Literature, music and art are the first and most sensitive spheres in which this spiritual revolution makes itself felt. They reflect the dark picture of the present time and show the importance of what at first was only a little point of light noticed by few and for the great majority non-existent. Perhaps they even grow dark in their turn, but on the other hand they turn away from the soulless life of the present towards those substances and ideas which give free scope to the nonmaterial strivings of the soul.<sup>54</sup>

Contemporary art, Kandinsky asserted, had the potential to enhance human creativity and, thus, lead to the revival of spiritual life. His *All Saints I* (figure 5), compositionally resembling the medieval Nativity icons (figure 6), illustrates the scope of his experimentation with colour and marks a stage of his movement towards non-representational painting, being yet another example of how important and stimulating the encounters with medieval icons were for the avant-garde movement.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Spira, p. 128.

<sup>54</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. by Michael T. H. Sadler ([Auckland]: Floating Press, 2008), p. 44. Kandinsky considered his style to have substantially benefited from the study of Orthodox iconography, which he first encountered during an ethnographic field trip to the province of Vologda. He visited peasants’ houses with traditional devotional corners (*krasnyi ugol*) where family icons would be displayed and, as he later recalled, this experience ‘taught [him] to move within the picture’. Wassily Kandinsky, ‘Reminiscences/Three Pictures’, in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. by Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo, new edn (New York: Da Capo, 1994), pp. 355–391 (pp. 368–369). Icons exerted an influence also on some Western avant-garde artists. For instance, Henri Matisse during his visit to Russia in October 1911 was quoted to have said: ‘Yesterday I saw a collection of old Russian icons. They are really great art. I am in love with their moving simplicity which, to me, is closer and dearer than Fra Angelico. In these icons the soul of the artists who painted them opens out like a mystical flower. And from them we ought to learn how to understand art.’ M. Sh., ‘U Matisse’ [With Matisse], *Rannee utro* [Early Morning], 26 October 1911, quoted in Y. A. Rusakov, ‘Matisse in Russia in the Autumn of 1911’, *Burlington Magazine*, May 1975, pp. 284–291 (p. 287).

<sup>55</sup> Another example of such a stimulating encounter is Mikhail Larionov’s theory of Rayism (or Rayonism). Its aim was to render visible the immaterial dimension of the world, outside of time and space. By painting rays imagined to be reflected by various objects, Rayists strived to arrive at what Anthony Parton calls the ‘visualisation of the invisible’. The assumption that such a visualisation was

During the time Rilke spent in Russia, visiting art museums and meeting with Russian artists and writers, the interest in the Orthodox icon was reaching its peak. Several years later, reflecting on this widespread admiration of the icon, Alexander Benois – the Russian art historian and the founder of the influential journal *Mir iskusstva* (The World of Art) with whom Rilke maintained regular contact after his return to Germany – argued that icons displayed ‘unexpected closeness to our times’ and ‘one would have to be blind not to believe [...] in their huge capacity to affect contemporary art’.<sup>56</sup> A comparison of contemporary art and the medieval icon, according to Benois, revealed a number of common characteristics. The most important were ‘a reluctance to settle with what we call “realism”’ and ‘the use of colour [that] lifts the art above the prosaic, away from feeling linked to everyday experience [...] into a realm belonging to another world’.<sup>57</sup> Benois observed that contemporary art and medieval iconography shared ‘the logic of the irreal’, through which ‘art returns in full to its mystic meaning’.<sup>58</sup> Like Kandinsky, he linked the revival of interest in the Orthodox icon with contemporary art’s impulse to strive towards a fusion of the aesthetic and the spiritual.<sup>59</sup>

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possible was much in tradition with the Orthodox iconography. See Anthony Parton, *Mikhail Larionov and the Russian Avant-Garde* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1993), p. 65.

<sup>56</sup> Benois, quoted in Spira, pp. 121–123. Rilke visited Benois in his summer house in Peterhof, on the outskirts of St Petersburg, in August 1900. They exchanged extensive correspondence between 1900 and 1906. Rilke hoped to translate into German Benois’s study *Istoriya russkiy zhivopisi v XIX veke* [A History of Russian Painting in the Nineteenth Century], which came out in 1902. However, the project fell through due to problems with securing a publisher. The correspondence between Rilke and Benois was published in *Rilke und Russland: Briefe, Erinnerungen, Gedichte* [Rilke and Russia: Letters, Memoirs, Poetry], ed. by Konstantin Asadowski (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1986).

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 121–122.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>59</sup> Spira observes that Benois’s appreciation of the revival of interest in the icon was connected to his belief that ‘if the sacredness that was transmitted to the faith-based world through icons in the Middle Ages had been withdrawn from history in the intervening years, as society turned its attention to more secular concerns’, it was to be ‘re-revealed in the present time in a manner that was consistent with the forms of contemporary culture’ (p. 123). The Russian Church, however, did not respond well to the avant-garde painters’ appropriation of iconographic motifs. Some of their works were considered sacrilegious. In 1912, for instance, Goncharova had to defend her decision to include her paintings of *The Four Evangelists* at The Donkey’s Tail exhibition, as ‘the Public Censor had considered it blasphemous [...] and ordered the police to confiscate them’ (Spira, p. 139).

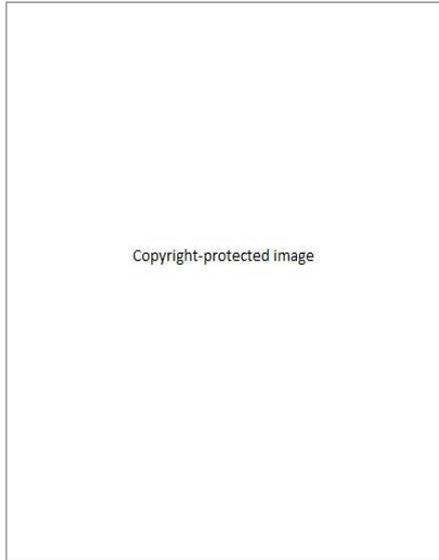


Figure 3. Natalia Goncharova, *Annunciation*, 1909. Private collection.

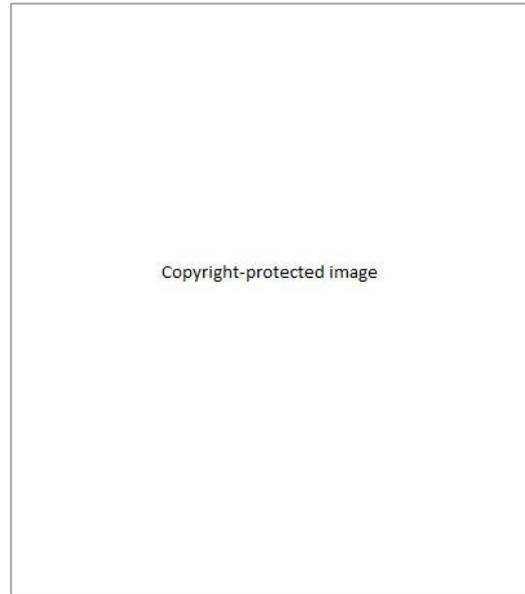


Figure 4. *Annunciation*. A fourteenth-century icon. The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

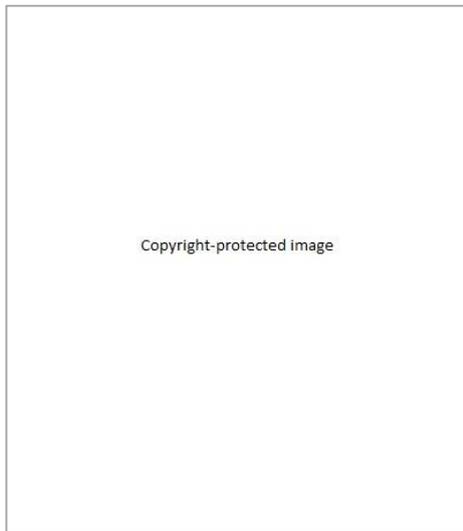


Figure 5. Wassily Kandinsky, *All Saints I*, 1911. Städtische Galerie in Lenbachhaus, Munich.

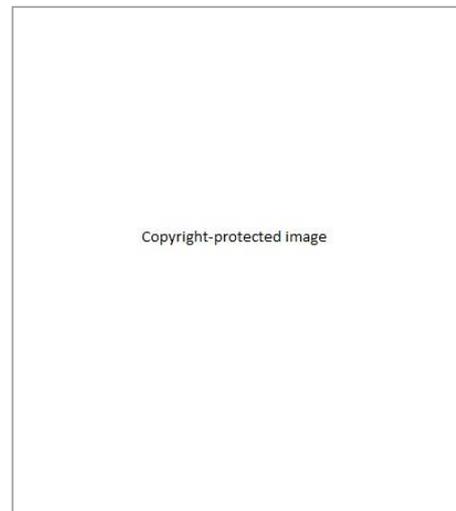


Figure 6. *Nativity*. A fifteenth-century icon. The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg.

In his essay on Russian iconographic art, Rilke drew special attention to the manner in which aesthetics and religion come together in the Orthodox icon. He engages both with the theological interpretation and with the aesthetic features of the icon to explore the icon's potential to provide modern Christians with a model to conceptualise their relationship with God. A substantial part of the essay is devoted to a discussion of the roles of the artist-monk and the viewer-suppliant in the tradition of Orthodox icon-veneration. Rilke asserts that both the traditional icon form and the individual experiences of the artist and the viewer hold value, and the meaning of the icon is born in their encounter. The centuries-old forms of icons, according to Rilke, may gradually lose their comprehensibility and slowly fade like the facial features of the painted Madonnas. With time the layers of varnish darken because of the candle smoke, and only empty dark ovals of the saints' faces are left. These 'empty ovals' (*leeren Ovale*), Rilke argues, do not testify to the demise of the tradition, but constitute 'the space in which the viewer has to create anew what the artist originally created, a possibility that fulfils itself in the frames of the paintings through the piety of those who pray before them'.<sup>60</sup> This act of the icon's re-creation through its veneration is what Rilke repeatedly underscores. He observes that even though over centuries icons may have lost their original glamour, they can continue to bear relevance to the contemporary world, because in the act of veneration their meaning is time and again actualised. Their dark, 'empty' forms are filled again by means of the viewer's prayerful attention.<sup>61</sup>

Viewed from this perspective, the icon – like the medieval dogmas in the Modernist theologians' interpretation – does not seem to have a timeless, inherent meaning of its own. Its meaning is relational, born in an encounter with the viewer-suppliant. Rilke conceives of the iconographic tradition as being constantly renewed through the ritual of icon-veneration in which Orthodox Christians contemplate and co-create the icon. In one

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<sup>60</sup> Rilke, 'Russische Kunst', p. 154.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

of the cycle's poems, Rilke renders the act of icon-veneration as the entering of a valley at dusk, emphasising the fact that though the icon's form may limit the perspective, giving a certain frame to one's individual experience – just like the mountains circumscribe the space of the valley – it simultaneously helps to focus one's attention on the opening that appears on the horizon:

I surrounded Your dark being,  
and entered into every painting  
with two kisses or three,  
as if at dusk in a valley.<sup>62</sup>

The kissing of the icon, a traditional Orthodox practice of showing reverence to the divine reality to which the icon directs the viewer's attention, creates an entrance through which the viewer can venture into the icon's world. The hermeneutics of trust exercised by viewers who believe in the icon's meaningfulness is reciprocated by the icon's offering them a space that invites their personal responses – each viewer enters the valley by him- or herself.

Rilke's understanding of the role that the icon plays in religious worship is deeply informed by the Orthodox theological tradition. While in the Protestant and Catholic traditions visual art has always performed a subservient role to the Scriptures and its primary aim was to depict biblical events so that the illiterate who had no direct access to the written word could receive basic religious instruction, in the Orthodox tradition, as Leonid Ouspensky explains, 'the icon like the word, is a liturgic act, [...] like the word, has always been and is an integral part of religion, one of the instruments for the knowledge of God, one of the means of communion with Him.'<sup>63</sup> The icon is not supposed

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<sup>62</sup> Rilke, '[Poem 58]', in *Prayers of a Young Poet*, p. 95, ll. 5–8. The German original: 'umstellte ich Dein dunkles Sein | und ging in jedes Bild hinein | mit zweiten Küssen oder drein, | wie in ein nachtend Tal.' Rilke, 'Die Gebete', p. 355.

<sup>63</sup> Ouspensky, p. 31.

to be ‘read’ like Western religious paintings – it rarely contains much narrative – but rather contemplated and meditated upon like the words of the Scripture. The theological foundation for the icon-veneration consists in the doctrines of the Incarnation and Transfiguration. Just like Christ became a living image (Greek *eikōn*) of God on earth through the Incarnation, so the icon symbolically points to the divine and encourages the viewer to contemplate the grandeur of transfigured reality. In the Orthodox tradition, the icon is believed to create a space where the divine and the human can meet; its meaning ‘lies precisely in that it transmits, or rather testifies visually to these two realities, the reality of God and of the world, of grace and of nature’.<sup>64</sup> One of the things that sets icons apart from other types of religious paintings is the fact they are never painted from the artist’s imagination nor from real life. They do not attempt to represent the world in a realistic or naturalistic manner, because their aim is to represent Christ and saints after they have been transfigured and begun partaking in the divine reality. Symbolically, that transformation is represented by the profusion of light and gold in the icon’s background, as well as the lack of shadows that people and objects would normally cast. Furthermore, the architectural elements present in the icon may seem flawed and illogical from a Western perspective (for instance, doors and windows might be painted in the wrong place or their size may not be in accordance with their function). As Ouspensky explains, ‘the meaning of this phenomenon is [...] to show clearly that the action taking place before our eyes is outside the laws of human logic’.<sup>65</sup> Finally, the composition of the Orthodox icon does not accord with the principles of perspectival vision. The majority of icons are either flat or employ the so-called reverse (or inverse) perspective that Ouspensky describes as a perspective ‘the point of departure of which lies not in the depth of the image, but in front of the image, as it were in the spectator’ himself or herself.<sup>66</sup> Through such a

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 36

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

displacement, which creates an illusion that the vanishing point is situated in front of the painting, the icon ‘frustrates the desire of the eye to relax into the illusion of depth’ and ‘places the point of natural rest within the viewer, thereby intensifying the viewer’s awareness of himself’.<sup>67</sup>

Rilke took special interest in the manner in which the icon can enhance viewers’ religious self-awareness and, at the same time, be co-created by them. While in the poem quoted earlier Rilke compared the icon to the entrance of the valley, in his essay he suggests that even if that entrance is temporarily forgotten and the centuries-old iconographic tradition seems to have fallen into obscurity, any single encounter with an attentive viewer-suppliant is a chance to revive that tradition and recreate the entrance to the valley once again. Even if icons at first glance appear to the modern believer to be art forms that in the course of time have become ossified and devoid of meaning, Rilke remarks, they can yet be revived in an attentive encounter:

It can happen that for centuries the two forms, that of gestures and that of paintings, through repetition become empty, meaningless or burdened with misconceived content – but they are passed on with embarrassing precision, and if there comes a suppliant or an artist, full of true values, he will find a beautiful, simple vessel ready to receive his riches, a vessel that is great enough to hold everything, even the overflow.<sup>68</sup>

Rilke’s understanding of the religious nature of the Orthodox icon brings to mind George Tyrrell’s and other Modernists’ later reflections on the nature and meaning of the Christian dogmas.<sup>69</sup> Their meaning, many Modernist theologians argued, is not self-evident, as the neo-scholastic school maintained, but can be fully realised only through personal experience of faith. ‘There must be some inward evidence and light added to the preacher’s

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<sup>67</sup> Spira, pp. 69–70.

<sup>68</sup> Rilke, ‘Russische Kunst’, p. 155.

<sup>69</sup> See chapter 1, section 3: ‘The “New Wine” of Modernism and the “Old Scholastic Bottles”’.

words', Tyrrell wrote, 'by which, for us, they become God's words in effect.'<sup>70</sup> Similarly, Rilke suggests, in order to comprehend the icon's spiritual meaning, one needs to be ready to relate to it in a personal, prayerful way.

Rilke describes the viewer-suppliant's engagement with the icon as 'a dance of thoughts [passing] through a lasting form' (*ein Tanz von Gedanken durch eine dauernde Form*), suggesting that the medieval form, far from limiting the viewers' freedom, provides them with a nourishing space for their creative thinking.<sup>71</sup> An act of prayer becomes for Rilke a meeting of the thought and form that revives and actualises the meaning of the icon. By performing a religious ritual, Rilke suggests, believers can through their praxis remove the dividing line between the inherited tradition and their lived experience. The believer's engagement with the visual form of the icon, the verbal form of prayer, and the bodily form of gestures creates a bridge between the inherited traditions and the experience of modernity. Rilke's fascination with the strong presence of ritual in the Orthodox Christian practice, which he interpreted as an opportunity to continually experience God in the everyday, led him to draw a distinction between 'faith' and 'religion'. He defined the former as an intellectual coming to God and the latter as an experiential belief, a 'direction of heart'.<sup>72</sup> Rilke further asserted that he had 'an indescribable trust' in people whose religion can be traced back to their 'tribal sources', like 'the Jews, the Arabs, and to a certain extent the Orthodox Russians'.<sup>73</sup> Their religion, by means of ritual, Rilke explains, permeates and shapes their everyday lives:

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<sup>70</sup> Tyrrell, 'Revelation as Experience', p. 131. Tyrrell expanded on this point, further explaining: 'That Christ died is a proposition whose meaning is clear to all; that He died for our sins is also apprehensible intellectually for most; but its divine sense is revealed only in the light of inward spiritual experience – of our own divine and religious life. The revelation lies not in the word or statement nor in the intellectual thought that it evokes; but in the interior experience of redemption through Christ which it occasions and by which it is interpreted' (*ibid.*, p. 138).

<sup>71</sup> Rilke, 'Russische Kunst', p. 155.

<sup>72</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, 'Letter to Ilse Blumenthal-Weiss, 28 December 1921', in *Selected Letters: 1902–1926*, pp. 334–337 (pp. 335).

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 336.

When the Arab turns at certain hours towards the East and casts himself down, that is religion. It is hardly 'faith'. [...] It is a natural animation within a being through whom the Wind of God blows three times a day, as a consequence of which we are at least – supplé.<sup>74</sup>

This 'natural animation' that is born in a regular active participation in religious rituals is something that Rilke considered Western Christianity to have lost.

Witnessing Russian people taking part in religious rituals, Rilke discovered the value of prayer in which the form – both verbal and bodily, for instance, genuflecting – provided a framework through which, he thought, one could experience God. In a letter to his wife Clara, he describes how his experience of Orthodox worship changed his views on the nature of prayer:

Have I not known ever since I was in Russia, and with such great conviction, that prayer and its time and its reverent and unstinted gestures were the condition of God and of his return to all those who barely expect it, who only kneel down and stand up and are suddenly filled to the brim? So will I kneel down and stand up, daily, alone in my room, and will keep holy all that befalls me: even what has not come, even disappointment, even desertion.<sup>75</sup>

Rilke's conviction that the religiosity he found in Russia and deemed to revolve more around the experiential rather than intellectual dimension has much to offer to modern Christians comes to the fore in 'The Book of Monastic Life'. As one of the poems suggests, even if modern believers have lost interest in and understanding of old Christian doctrines and rituals, it does not necessarily follow that it is impossible to revive their substance and make them meaningful again:

Because someone once desired You,  
I know that we, too, may desire You.

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 337.

<sup>75</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, 'Letter to Clara Rilke, 29 June 1906', in *Selected Letters: 1902–1926*, p. 98.

Even if we renounce all depths:  
when gold lies deep in the mountains  
and no one's there to dig for it,  
one day the river brings it to the surface,  
reaching in stillness into the stones,  
into their fullness.

Even when we don't desire:

*God ripens.*<sup>76</sup>

While the poem quoted earlier compared the ritual of icon veneration to the entering of a valley, this one explores the scenario of the valley not being walked any more. There is no one to take the effort to search for the 'gold [that] lies deep in the mountains'. However, as the poem suggests, this does not mean that the gold disappears. The poem probes into the phonetic similarity between the German words *wollen* ('to desire') and *vollen* (from *voll* – 'full'), contradicting the idea that God's ripening may be dependent on human desire and, by extension, on the religious ritual performed by believers. It is the mountain river that – in absence of the human believer – brings the gold to light again, and the stones whose 'fullness' welcomes God. Not only does God continue to exist in the absence of human attention, but he also 'ripens'.

The concept of the ripening of God, which corresponds to the Modernist theologians' reflections on the evolution of Christian dogma, suggests that Christian revelation has an ongoing, dynamic character. Rilke's icon-painting monk partakes in it by symbolically revealing (not mimetically representing) the invisible, concealed God and, thus, by being like the river from the poem. His icons, showing the fullness of transfigured life, try to revive the desire for God that was an inherent part of the everyday

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<sup>76</sup> Rilke, '[Poem 16]', in *Prayers of a Young Poet*, p. 50. 'Daraus, dass Einer Dich einmal gewollt hat, | weiß ich, dass wir Dich wollen dürfen. | Wenn wir auch alle Tiefen verwürfen: | wenn ein Gebirge Gold hat, | und keiner mehr es ergraben mag, - | trägt es einmal der Fluss zutag, | der in die Stille der Steine greift, | der vollen: || Auch wenn wir nicht wollen: | *Gott reift.*' Rilke, 'Die Gebete', p. 317.

life of earlier centuries, but seems to have faded in modernity. A similar aim can in fact be discerned at the heart of Rilke's cycle. It was published as part of the volume *The Book of Hours*, whose title suggests that it was conceived as a project aimed at recovering part of the medieval Western tradition of religious ritual that for Rilke bore a close affinity with the praxis of contemporary Russian religiosity.

When in a letter to his editor from Insel Verlag Rilke proposed that his collection be published with the title *Die Gebete (The Prayers)*, he added that in its form it 'recalls the *Livres d'heures*' of the later Middle Ages.<sup>77</sup> The publisher eventually decided to publish the volume under the title *Das Stunden-Buch (The Book of Hours)*, making more explicit the link with the medieval tradition at which Rilke had hinted.<sup>78</sup> The book of hours, also known as the divine office and, in abridged version, the breviary, traditionally incorporates prayers recited at each of the seven canonical hours (Matins, Lauds, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, Compline). It evolved from the desert monks' practice of 'unceasing prayer' and in the Middle Ages became a standard monastic form of worship.<sup>79</sup> By regular prayer at set times of the day, according to the theologian Robert Taft, the believer

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<sup>77</sup> Quoted in Mark S. Burrows, 'Introduction', in *Prayers of a Young Poet*, pp. 10–32 (n. 14). Though it is difficult to say how deeply familiar Rilke was with the history of monastic spirituality, it is worth noting that in his letter he uses a French phrase to refer to the idea of the book of hours, which from the Egyptian deserts came to Europe most probably through France (the first monastic communities were established in France by John Cassian). See Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism: From the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

<sup>78</sup> Even though the cycle's title explicitly points to the ancient monastic tradition of prayer, surprisingly few critics have tried to analyse Rilke's poems in this context. The only substantial discussion of the monastic setting of the cycle is to be found in Brodsky's *Russia in the Works of Rainer Maria Rilke*. She argues that a 'book of hours is a very old form [...]. Its form and content are rigidly set, and its theme is the exposition of fixed canonical truths. Rilke's book of prayers, on the other hand, contains the restless, inspired, and anguished meditations of a self-conscious individual who is caught between the strictures of his own religious tradition and the lures of western art' (p. 66). It seems to me that the dichotomy set up by Brodsky between 'rigidly set' prayers, which are supposed offer an 'exposition of fixed canonical truths', and 'the restless, inspired, and anguished meditations of a self-conscious individual' is false. The prayers which the books of hours contained were neither 'rigidly set' nor was their theme 'the exposition of fixed canonical truths'. In fact, the psalmodic prayer of the desert fathers and early monastics was used primarily for individual vigils and meditations. It did not serve to expose any fixed canonical truths, as its aim was to help those who pray enter a frame of mind in which they are able to reject all distractions and concepts and begin a meditative prayer. See Robert Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West: The Origins of the Divine Office and Its Meaning for Today* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1986).

<sup>79</sup> See Dunn, pp. 1–81, and Janet Backhouse, *Books of Hours* (London: British Library, 1985).

undertakes the task of the ‘sanctification of time,’ opening it up to the divine intervention.<sup>80</sup> Taft asserts that the liturgy of hours has also a very personal dimension, and for those who pray according to it, it can become ‘a sanctification of life by turning to God at the beginning and end of each of its days.’<sup>81</sup> In a similar vein, Giorgio Agamben argues that the liturgy of hours ‘transforms the whole of life into an Office by way of temporal scansion,’ observing that the monks whose every day is measured by prayer, make ‘their form of life a liturgy and the liturgy a form of life’.<sup>82</sup>

The liturgy of hours grew out of monastic spirituality grounded in St Paul’s command to pray without ceasing, to ‘pray constantly’ (I Thessalonians 5.17).<sup>83</sup> As several treatises and manuals of prayer have survived from the early monastic period – the most important one being *Chapters on Prayer* by Evagrius Ponticus (d. 399) – it is possible to imagine how the early desert monks conceptualised prayer and how, by singing the psalms, they tried to put the Pauline idea of ‘unceasing prayer’ into practice. Evagrius warned his readers against perceiving prayer as merely a habit or an outward gesture. He exhorted: ‘Whether you pray along with the brethren or alone, strive to make your prayer more than a mere habit. Make it a true inner experience.’<sup>84</sup> From the perspective of human agency, Evagrius considered prayer a ‘rejection of concepts’.<sup>85</sup> When this rejection was complete and one’s spirit was free from distractions, the divine agency was to take initiative: ‘Stand guard over your spirit, keeping it free from concepts at the time of prayer

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<sup>80</sup> As Taft asserts, through the liturgy, time is believed to be ‘transformed into event, an epiphany of the kingdom of God’ (p. 363).

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 359.

<sup>82</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), pp. 22, 83.

<sup>83</sup> The texts recited or sung by monks praying from the book of hours would be selected primarily from the Book of Psalms. The custom of singing chosen psalms at regular hours, which was transmitted into the West in the early fifth century, was considered crucial in the desert monks’ way of prayer as it helped the mind and the spirit enter the state of watchfulness and vigilance. When in the fifth century John Cassian founded one of the first Western monasteries in Marseilles and Lérins (Gaul, present-day France), psalmodic prayer gained increasing popularity in Europe. For a detailed discussion of the prayer life of early Christian monastics, see C. H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages*, 3rd edn (Harlow: Longman, 2001), esp. pp. 1–29, 107–145.

<sup>84</sup> Evagrius Ponticus, *The Praktikos & Chapters on Prayer*, trans. by John Eudus Bamberger (Spencer, MA: Cistercian Publications, 1972), p. 61.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

so that it may remain in its own deep calm. [...] This is when you will receive the most glorious gift of prayer.’<sup>86</sup>

The icon-painting monk in Rilke’s cycle prays according to Evagrius’s advice. He rejects any single totalising idea of God and instead experiences the divine in a series of visionary images. If one attempted to find a pattern in the manner in which his experience is presented, it would be extremely difficult to discern one. The speaker addresses God in a myriad of ways, employing metaphors and similes which compare God to a tower (poem 2), tree (poems 3, 5, 23), river (12), church nave (27), cathedral (15), forest (47), bird (22), stone (58), battle (55), song (26), and rhyme (51). It is hardly possible to find a coherent pattern that would embrace all these images. Each poem and each experience seems to be highly idiosyncratic and enclosed within their own boundaries, resisting any easy explanation with reference to the whole cycle. The fact that particular experiences do not combine into a coherent and clear portrayal of the divine and defy any neatly structured interpretations, I suggest, is closely related to Rilke’s engagement with the Orthodox iconographic tradition. The key to understand how this tradition informs ‘The Book of Monastic Life’, it seems to me, lies in the image of circling, which defines the speaker’s relationship with God throughout the cycle. Such relational circularity is inscribed into a number of icons, most famously in Andrei Rublev’s *Trinity*. An analysis of this icon will provide an interpretative framework for the concept of circling around God, which for Rilke represents the manner in which God can be encountered in modernity.

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

## Perichoresis and the ‘Dance of Thoughts through a Lasting Form’

Rublev’s medieval icons were among the biggest discoveries of the early-twentieth-century Russian art historians, and the successful restoration of his *Trinity (Troitsa)* in 1904–1906 became an incentive to launch further restoration projects.<sup>87</sup> During his second journey to Russia, Rilke travelled to the Trinity Monastery of St Sergius in Sergiev Posad, considered one of the spiritual centres of Russian Orthodoxy, to see *Trinity* for himself. The icon, inspired by an episode described in Genesis 18.1–15, portrays the three angels who visited Abraham by the oak of Mamre as God the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.



Figure 7. Andrei Rublev, *Trinity (Troitsa)*, 1425–1427. The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

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<sup>87</sup> For a history of the icon’s creation and restoration, see Gabriel Bunge, *The Rublev Trinity: The Icon of the Trinity by the Monk-Painter Andrei Rublev*, trans. by Andrew Louth (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2007).

The relational element that Rilke elaborated on in his essay is foregrounded by the icon's composition. The nature of the relationship between God the Father, God the Son and the Holy Spirit is represented by the circle that forms the basis of the icon's composition, embracing all three persons.<sup>88</sup> By placing the three figures in a circle, as Ouspensky points out, Rublev 'united them in one general smooth and flowing movement along the line of the circle'.<sup>89</sup> The central angel inclines his head towards his right, at the same time moving his foot away from the vertical axis of the circle in the opposite direction. He is considered to be God the Son, pointing with his hand towards the Eucharistic chalice with the head of a sacrificial animal that symbolises the voluntary sacrifice taken by Christ. On the Son's right hand sits God the Father, cloaked in a robe of unidentifiable ethereal colour, holding his staff with both hands. On Christ's left hand is the Holy Spirit, wearing a green robe which represents the 'fullness of power' and new life.<sup>90</sup> Their unity is symbolised by their almost identical facial features and the gentle equilibrium of the composition.

The lines of the composition do not form a linear perspective, but diverge on the horizon, creating an illusion that the circle needs to be completed by the viewer. The icon's reverse perspective seems to be pouring out of the frame and expanding so as to embrace the viewer-suppliant, invited to participate in the circular movement of the Trinity. This motion, considered one of the attributes of the Trinity since the times of the Church Fathers, is referred to with the Greek term *perichoresis* (Latin *circumincessio*), meaning 'rotation'. It describes the harmonious relationship between the three persons of the Trinity – a relationship that defies any symmetrical hierarchy. As Richard Kearney explains:

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<sup>88</sup> Historically, the Eastern Orthodox Tradition forbade to depict God the Father in any form. The Old Testament Trinity – in which he is shown as one of the angels entering a relation with the Son and the Holy Spirit – was the only representation found acceptable. See Leonid Ouspensky, 'The Holy Trinity', in Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, pp. 200–205 (p. 204, n. 4).

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

Meaning literally ‘dance (*choros*) around (*peri*),’ it referred to a circular movement where Father, Son, and Spirit gave place to each other in a gesture of reciprocal dispossession rather than fusing into a single substance. The Latin spells this out intriguingly by punning on the dual phonetic connotations of *circum-in-sessio* (from *sedo*, to sit or assume a position) and *circum-in-cessio* (from *cedo*, to cede, give way or dis-position). So what emerges is an image of the three distinct persons moving *toward* each other in a gesture of immanence and *away from* each other in a gesture of transcendence. At once belonging and distance. Moving in and out of position. An interplay of loving and letting go.<sup>91</sup>

Rilke’s cycle explicitly foregrounds this circular movement. The manner in which the speaker of the cycle conceives of his search for God can be well illustrated by the second poem of the volume, which presents a circular mode of cognition and entails a particular type of relational engagement:

I live my life in widening rings  
which spread out to cover everything.  
I may not complete the last one,  
but I’ll surely try:

I’m circling around God, around the ancient tower,  
and I’ve been circling for thousands of years –  
and I don’t know yet: am I a falcon, a storm,  
or a vast song...<sup>92</sup>

The monk’s movement towards God – he refers to it as ‘circling’ (‘kreisen’), defining his life as lived in ‘rings’ (‘Ringen’) – is a recurrent theme in the cycle (it appears

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<sup>91</sup> Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 109. The form ‘sedo’ is probably a typo in Kerney’s argument, as it means ‘to lay someone or something at rest’ and does not have a ‘sessio’ form. The verb ‘to sit’ would be ‘sedeo’, and its past participle is indeed ‘sessum’ from which the form ‘sessio’ is derived.

<sup>92</sup> Rilke, ‘[Poem 2]’, in *Prayers of a Young Poet*, p. 36. ‘Ich lebe mein Leben in wachsenden Ringen, | die sich über die Dinge ziehn. | Ich werde den letzten vielleicht nicht vollbringen, | aber versuchen will ich ihn: || Ich kreise um Gott, um den uralten Turm, | und ich kreise jahrtausendlang; | und ich weiß noch nicht: bin ich ein Falke, ein Sturm | oder ein großer Gesang...’ Rilke, ‘Die Gebete’, p. 307.

again in poems 9, 17, 19, 35 and 64). It emphasises the dynamic and living nature of the monk's faith. His admission that he has been circling 'for thousands of years' can be read as either a hyperbolic description of his long-lasting devotion to God or the awareness of his belonging to and participation in a centuries-old belief system. The monk's circular movement makes it possible for him to approach God from a variety of perspectives, and at the same time avoid being limited to any one particular angle. Thus, circling allows for dynamism and heterogeneity in the speaker's experience of his relationship with God, which he can effectively visualise through such diverse images as that of a 'falcon', a 'storm' and a 'song'.

Through his constant circling around God, the monk refuses to endorse a single viewpoint from which he would contemplate the divine in a static manner and chooses to engage with a particular vision he is given at a specific moment in time. He lives his life in movement, knowing that he may fail to complete the final circle ('I may not complete the last one'), because to assume a seemingly neutral and immovable vantage point would be to adopt a totalising approach. It would make the monk incapable of engaging with God's dynamic nature and result in his elevating one particular experience or impression of the divine to the status of an objective, static truth about God. Constant circling enables the monk to encounter God in a variety of experiences and, thus, to apprehend his infinite nature more fully.

The refusal to endorse a single static viewpoint is, according to Pavel Florensky, a Russian philosopher, scientist, Orthodox theologian and Rilke's contemporary, a distinctive feature of the icon's reverse perspective. In his essay 'Obratnaya perspektiva' ('Reverse Perspective', 1919), he describes how the icon – breaking with a mimetic representation of the world – offers a 'polycentred' and 'synthetic' vision that is dynamic and comprised of a number of angles.<sup>93</sup> Similarly, the icon-painting monk from Rilke's

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<sup>93</sup> Pavel Florensky, 'Reverse Perspective', in Pavel Florensky, *Beyond Vision: Essays on the Perception of Art*, ed. by Nicoletta Misler, trans. by Wendy Salmond (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), pp. 197–

cycle, due to his circling around God, is incapable of assuming a totalising approach. There is no neutral vantage point from which he could observe God in his entirety without entering a relationship with him. According to Florensky, the pictorial difference between the icon's reverse perspective and Western painting's linear perspective carries serious metaphysical implications. The two ways of representing perspective, Florensky argues, illustrate two diverse interpretations of reality. He views linear perspective as an attempt at presenting an objective perception of reality which, according to him, is flawed because the artist assumes his own single viewpoint to be 'the last instance' and 'on the basis of his own furtive experience he constructs all of reality, all of it, on the pretext of objectivity, squeezing it into what he has observed of reality's own differential'.<sup>94</sup> On the contrary, in paintings that employ reverse perspective, Florensky asserts, 'the visual image is not presented to the consciousness as something simple, without work and effort, but is constructed, pieced together from fragments successively sewn one to the other, such that each of them is perceived more or less from its own point of view'.<sup>95</sup> The sewing of these diverse fragments together produces what Florensky calls the 'polycentric perspective', which transcends single human experiences in order to embrace a larger, synthetic picture of reality.<sup>96</sup>

The manner in which the viewer apprehends the two perspectives, Florensky asserts, differs considerably. While linear perspective is characterised by a certain 'theatricality' and situates the viewer as a mere observer who views life 'as just a spectacle', reverse perspective creates a challenge for the viewer, who needs to undertake cognitive effort to re-create the synthetic image painted by the artist.<sup>97</sup> The fact that the Orthodox icon depicts transfigured reality employing reverse perspective, according to

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272. Florensky further developed his ideas on iconography in his study *Iconostasis*, trans. by Olga Andrejev and Donald Sheehan (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996).

<sup>94</sup> Florensky, 'Reverse Perspective', p. 264.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 270.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 211–212.

Florensky, averts the danger of objectifying God and idolising any single viewpoint, and at the same time encourages the viewer's participation in co-creating the icon's synthetic vision. Since transfigured reality is dynamic and living, Florensky implies, it would be reductive to attempt to depict it from a single linear perspective.<sup>98</sup>

Rilke's cycle, I suggest, ekphrastically engaging with the iconic perspective, poetically challenges the metaphysics based on a single viewpoint. The ostensible inconsistencies in the imagery of 'The Book of Monastic Life' correspond to the fragmentariness of the Orthodox icon's polycentric vision. In a similar way, they make it possible to show divine reality from a multiplicity of perspectives at once, to reveal and juxtapose its various aspects. In a manner corresponding to that in which the medieval icon and the twentieth-century Cubist paintings offer alternatives to illusionism and totalising perspectival vision, Rilke's cycle explores a multiplicity of often contradictory and inconsistent metaphors describing the speaker's experience of God. It is possible to draw a parallel between the incoherence of the imagery present in the cycle and that of medieval icons that introduce seemingly illogical and incoherent architectural elements into their background to make the viewer suspend, or even question, the conventional logic and, thus, to convey the singularity of the encounter with the divine. The polycentric perspective of the icon (and avant-garde paintings) grants viewers more agency than linear perspective, offering them a space in which they become active co-creators. Entering this space, the viewer can integrate a number of apparently inconsistent elements, creating a unique meaning. Likewise, Rilke's cycle through its rich and often baffling imagery poetically renders the polycentredness of the Orthodox icon, challenging readers in a similar way. The monk describes his relationship with God by means of unusual and often surprising similes and metaphors. He professes to 'hang like a sparkling necklace | around the darkness of [God's] shoulders' (poem 21), to be one of the 'veins of basalt | in God's

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<sup>98</sup> Yet, as Florensky points out, the icon's multifocal, synthetic vision, to an eye accustomed to the illusionism of linear perspective may seem naïve.

severe majesty' (poem 42), to be a dark forest in which God 'walk[s] with the lightness of deer' (poem 46), and 'the proud city of the Lord' that 'speak[s] of Him in a hundred tongues' (poem 49). The speaker's attempts at describing God reveal a similar breadth of imagery. He refers to God as 'a young bird with yellow talons | and large eyes' that has 'fallen from the nest' (poem 22), 'the murmuring embers | sleeping on all the ovens' (poem 37), 'the soft evening hour' (poem 55), the 'darkening ground' (poem 62), and 'the forest of contradictions' (poem 47). The believer who is able to embrace these contradictions and rise to the challenge posed by the fragmented, polycentric vision, as one of the poems suggests, shall be amply rewarded:

He who reconciles the many paradoxes of life  
and grasps them in a symbol gratefully  
is the one who drives  
the noisy crowd from the palace  
and celebrates differently; and You're the guest  
he receives on soft evenings.<sup>99</sup>

The 'grasping' of reality 'in a symbol' that is capable of embracing various and diverse 'paradoxes', like the icon whose polycentric perspective brings together a number of viewpoints, gives the person strength to face 'the noisy crowd'. Driving it away from the 'palace' brings to mind Jesus's cleansing of the temple of moneychangers who turn his house, 'the house of prayer', into a 'den of thieves' (Matthew 21.12–13). Those who constitute the 'noisy crowd', like the moneychangers in the Gospel, advertise their own truths loudly in an attempt to capture others' attention. The noise they make stands in stark contrast to the 'softness' of the evenings on which God may be received. This 'softness' is a response to one's gratefulness, attentiveness, and patient pursuit of the symbol capable

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<sup>99</sup> Rilke, '[Poem 17]', in *Prayers of a Young Poet*, p. 51, ll. 1–6. 'Wer seines Lebens viele Widersinne | versöhnt und dankbar in ein Sinnbild fasst, | der drängt | die Lärmenden aus dem Palast, | wird *anders* festlich und Du bist der Gast, | den er an sanften Abenden empfängt.' Rilke, 'Die Gebete', p. 318.

of embracing ‘the many paradoxes of life’. It is not in the noisy daylight, the poem suggests, but on a soft evening that one receives the divine guest. Not only does the evening evoke calmness and silence that contrast with the noise of the day, but it also brings darkness, which is the most conspicuous feature of Rilke’s God.

### **The Darkness of Rilke’s God**

More than twenty years after his journeys to Russia, Rilke reminisced in a letter to Ilse Jahr: ‘Russia opened out for me and gave me the brotherliness and darkness of God, in whom alone there is fellowship. That was how I named him then, the God who had dawned upon me’.<sup>100</sup> Darkness is indeed one of the few recurrent images associated with the manner in which the speaker of ‘The Book of Monastic Life’ experiences his relationship with God.<sup>101</sup> The monk, whose prayers in the middle of the cycle, according to the prose interpolations, turn into visionary poems that ‘leap into words from chaos and wildness’, explores the dark nature of God in a number of poems.<sup>102</sup> In poem 3 he asserts: ‘My God is dark’ (‘Mein Gott ist dunkel’); poem 11 opens: ‘You, darkness from which I come’ (‘Du, Dunkelheit, aus der ich stamme’); and in poem 21 the speaker professes: ‘I hang like a sparkling necklace | around the darkness of Your shoulders’ (‘ich hange wie ein glänzendes Geschmeide | um Deiner Schultern Dunkelheit’). Further examples can be found in poem 28: ‘You’re so dark that my little brightness | makes no sense at your edge’

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<sup>100</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, ‘Letter to Ilse Jahr, 22 February 1923’, in *Selected Letters: 1902–1926*, pp. 372–374 (p. 373).

<sup>101</sup> Mark S. Burrows in his discussion of the darkness of God in Rilke’s poems, connects it to God’s ‘facelessness’ in later Judaism. He argues that ‘the invisibility of the God who hides, in contrast to the ‘imagined gods’ of wood and stone found in the Canaanite religion, establishes in the Hebrew scriptures God’s essential freedom and transcendence’, which was later explored by Christian mysticism and negative theology. ‘At the Boundary of Imagination: Rainer Maria Rilke and the Poetics of Theological Negation,’ *Studies in Spirituality*, 10 (2000), 33–50 (p. 34).

<sup>102</sup> Rilke, *Prayers of a Young Poet*, p. 56.

(‘Du bist so dunkel; meine kleine Helle | an Deinem Saum hat keinen Sinn’); poem 29: ‘Utterly dark is Your mouth from which I drifted astray, | and Your hands are of ebony’ (‘Ganz dunkel ist Dein Mund, von dem ich wehte, | und Deine Hände sind von Ebenholz’); poem 37: ‘You’re the dark unconscious one: | from eternity to eternity’ (‘Du bist der dunkle Unbewusste: | von Ewigkeit zu Ewigkeit’); poem 43: ‘You, great darkening weight | bearing down on me and on the world’ (‘Dich, großes dunkelndes Gewicht | an mir und an der Welt’) and poem 59: ‘God, don’t let go of me with Your hands, | for I am night from Your night’ (‘Gott, gibe mich nicht aus Deinen Händen, | so bin ich Nacht von Deiner Nacht’).

The darkness of Rilke’s God recalls the darkness of the icons he saw during his journey to Russia. The restoration projects were still under way – the official exhibition on which the restored icons from which dark layers of varnish and candle smoke were removed was held only in 1913.<sup>103</sup> In ‘The Book of Monastic Life’ this literal darkness of the Orthodox icon becomes a metaphysical attribute of God and an important part of the speaker’s reflections on his experience of the divine. The darkness surrounding God in Rilke’s cycle can be interpreted on multiple levels. It may well be connected to Evagrius’s understanding of prayer as ‘the rejection of concepts’ and his explicit warning against visualising God, which leads to idol worship. It may be also read as expressive of the speaker’s intuitive awareness that the way to understanding leads through ignorance, and whenever understanding is granted, it needs to be accepted as provisional only. Hence, the diverse metaphors and comparisons employed throughout the cycle with reference to God are almost always accompanied by images of darkness or night, which provide a corrective reminding the speaker that the insights into the divine reality that he is granted are never full and complete.

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<sup>103</sup> One of the largest exhibitions of icons was held in Moscow in March 1913 to celebrate 300 years of the Romanov dynasty. The following month, Mikhail Larionov organised an exhibition of icons and folk prints (*lubki*) in the Moscow Art Salon.

The cycle reverses the conventional Christian symbolism of the light and darkness opposition, according to which God is ‘the light’ that ‘shineth in darkness’ (John 1.5). The light imagery, traditionally associated with God, as several of Rilke’s poems suggest, has served to help the believers comprehend the grandeur of God. However, the origin of this imagery was historically contingent. After its time had passed, it ceased to perform its function. A new way to imagine God had to be conceived. Thus, Rilke’s monk develops a theory according to which God the tree has grown two primary branches, corresponding to Western and Eastern Christianity. In a series of eleven poems dated 26 September – according to the prose notes, the monk’s ‘most pious night’ – the concept of the growth and ripening of God is developed in much detail.<sup>104</sup> The monk considers the Western branch to have passed its prime and become barren:

The branch from God the tree that reached across all Italy  
has already bloomed.  
It might have liked  
to hasten becoming heavy-laden with fruit,  
but grew weary at the height of its blossoming –  
and now will yield no more.  
It felt only the spring of God’s presence,  
and only His Son, the Word,  
came to fruition.<sup>105</sup>

The infertility of the Italian branch, which can be associated with the Roman Catholic Church, is contrasted with the youthfulness and fertility of the Eastern branch. The latter, as the last of the series of poems about God the tree envisions, is going to bear fruit in the near future and surpass the Western branch: ‘With a branch which was never like that one,

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<sup>104</sup> Poems 26–36 in *Prayers of a Young Poet*, pp. 61–71; ‘Die Gebete’, pp. 326–335.

<sup>105</sup> Rilke, ‘[Poem 32]’, in *Prayers of a Young Poet*, p. 66, ll. 1–9. ‘Der Ast vom Baume Gott, der über Italien reicht, | *hat* schon geblüht. | Er hätte vielleicht | sich schon gerne, mit Früchten gefüllt, verfrüht, | doch er wurde mitten im Blühen müd, – und er wird keine Früchte haben. | Nur der *Frühling* Gottes war dort, | nur sein Sohn, das Wort, | vollendete sich.’ Rilke, ‘Die Gebete’, pp. 329–330.

| God the tree will eventually come, announcing | summer and murmuring with ripeness.<sup>106</sup> In the monk's vision, Christian revelation was not completed with Jesus's Incarnation, which marked only the spring of God's presence on earth. Similarly to Modernist theologians like Loisy and Tyrrell, the monk conceives of revelation as an ongoing process, or 'ripening', of God. Unlike them, however, he envisions Russian Orthodoxy to become the source of the Christian revival and to bring about the spiritual 'summer' when God will 'murmur with ripeness' again. He regards Western Christianity as having grown 'weary' and, for the time being, incapable of bearing any more fruit.

The monk's critical attitude to Western Christianity comes to the fore again when he compares Western and Eastern styles of religious art. He contrasts the images of the glowing and brilliant God of the Italian Renaissance, which Rilke saw during his journey to Italy in spring 1898, with the dark God of Orthodox icons, suggesting that the time of the former has passed. In a poem that the monk writes, as the prose interpolation explains, '[i]n remembrance and anticipation', he meditates on the differences between the manners in which God has been conceived and represented by Western and Orthodox artists:

So many angels came searching for You in the light,  
thrusting their brows toward the stars in the height,  
wanting to know You in all that is bright;  
but I find, whenever I write of You, that they  
distance themselves with faces turned aside  
from the folds of Your robe,

for You were only a guest of this gold.

Only to oblige that age when they  
entreated You with their clear and marbled prayers

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<sup>106</sup> Rilke, '[Poem 34]', in *Prayers of a Young Poet*, p. 69, ll. 1–3. 'Mit einem Ast, der jenem niemals glich, | wird Gott, der Baum, auch einmal sommerlich | verkündend warden und aus Reife rauschen.' Rilke, 'Die Gebete', p. 332.

did You reveal Yourself as the King of comets,  
proud of the rays that streamed across Your brow.

You turned homeward when that time melted away.

Utterly dark is Your mouth from which I drifted astray,  
and Your hands are of ebony.<sup>107</sup>

The brightness of God, the poem asserts, is not his inherent quality, but rather one of the many ways in which he has revealed himself throughout history. At a given point in time, people's 'clear and marbled prayers' asked for a powerful and awe-inspiring 'King of comets' and God responded to their request, assuming that guise. However, as the poem proclaims, he was 'only a guest of this gold'. When 'that time melted away', God ceased to reveal himself through bright images and retreated 'homeward'. As the final lines suggest, at present God's mouth is '[u]tterly dark' and his hands 'are of ebony'. It is the dark, wooden icons, not the golden Renaissance paintings that are capable of revealing his nature. To continue to present him as bright and glowing is to insist on preserving an early form in which God revealed himself, and ignore the meaning of the continual evolution of Christian revelation.

The darkness of God, unfolding in the Orthodox icon, is difficult to comprehend, and yet, Rilke's monk asserts, more real than the brilliant radiance of the God of Italian painters. Throughout the cycle, the latter is associated with an urge to measure the divine infinity and present it as finite, thus reducing its incomprehensibility and diversity into singleness and homogeneity. Michelangelo, to whom Rilke's monk refers a number of

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<sup>107</sup> Rilke, '[Poem 29]', in *Prayers of a Young Poet*, p. 64. 'So viele Engel suchen Dich im Lichte | und stoßen mit den Stirnen nach den Sternen | und wollen Dich aus jedem Leuchten lernen; | mir aber ist, sooft ich von Dir dichte, | dass sie mit abgewendetem Gesichte | von Deines Mantels Falten sich entfernen || denn Du warst selber nur ein Gast des Golds. | Nur einer Zeit zuliebe, die Dich flehte | in ihre klaren, marmornen Gebete | erschienst Du wie der König der Komete, | auf Deiner Stirne Strahlenströme stolz. || Du kehrtest heim, da jene Zeit zerschmolz. || Ganz dunkel ist Dein Mund, von dem ich wehte, | und Deine Hände sind von Ebenholz.' Rilke, 'Die Gebete', p. 328.

times, becomes the archetype of such an approach.<sup>108</sup> As one of the poems explains, in his drive to create the most perfect representation of God, he ‘forgot about immeasurability’.<sup>109</sup> On realising that his ambition to portray the divine in its completeness cannot be fulfilled, his love for God becomes tainted with ‘a great disdain | for his unattainability’.<sup>110</sup> His determination to achieve a more truthful and modern representation than those of medieval artists fails and ultimately estranges him from God.

For Rilke’s monk, immeasurability and darkness become the defining features of God, as he attempts to reclaim their relevance for modern Christianity. It is not Michelangelo’s glowing God who can be ‘enjoy[ed] [...] | like a festival’, but the difficult God of medieval icon-painters with whom the monk engages.<sup>111</sup> In yet another poem that contrasts the God of Italian painters with the God of the monk’s experience, the image of darkness becomes connected to a vision of organic co-existence between the believer and God:

Many robed brothers who live in cloisters under southern skies  
dwell beneath the fragrant shade of the bay trees.  
I know that they paint their Madonnas so humanly,  
and often dream of early Titians,  
how God passes glowingly through them.

But when I bow down into my self:  
My God is dark and like a clump  
of a hundred roots drinking silently.  
I lift myself from His warmth;  
more than this I don’t know, for all my branches  
rest in the depths and only sway in the winds.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Rilke became familiar with the art of the Italian Renaissance during his first journey to Italy in 1897. Between 1912 and 1921, Rilke translated a number of Michelangelo’s sonnets and madrigals. See Siegfried Mandel, ‘Rilke’s Translations of Michelangelo’s Poetry’, in *Rilke and the Visual Arts*, ed. by Frank Baron (Lawrence, KA: Coronado, 1982), pp. 97–121.

<sup>109</sup> Rilke, ‘[Poem 30]’, in *Prayers of a Young Poet*, p. 65, l. 5.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 15–16.

<sup>111</sup> Rilke, ‘[Poem 63]’, in *Prayers of a Young Poet*, pp. 100–107 (p. 101, ll. 43–44).

<sup>112</sup> Rilke, ‘[Poem 3]’, in *Prayers of a Young Poet*, p. 37. ‘Ich habe viele Brüder in Soutanen | im Süden, wo in Klöstern Lorbeer steht. | Ich weiß, wie menschlich sie Madonnen planen | und träume oft von

The poem splits into two parts: in the first stanza the speaker reflects on the paintings of his fellow-monks from the South, whereas the second stanza expresses the speaker's personal experience of the divine, which does not accord with the vision of God created by the Italian painters. The cloisters of the Southern monks are adorned by the fragrant bay laurel, which in the antiquity was associated with Apollo, the god of the sun and light. Their religious art, for Rilke's monk, is defined by the likes of Titian and the 'humanly' painted Madonnas. God 'passes glowingly' through their awe-inspiring radiant paintings.

The second stanza uses imagery that stands in stark contrast to the first part of the poem – it is introduced through the word 'but' (German 'doch'), which halts the smooth movement of the preceding lines. The meaning of the cryptic 'bowing down' becomes clear when the German verb 'neigen' is referred back to the first line of the opening poem of the cycle. In that poem the 'bowing down' of the hour and the ringing of bells resulted in the speaker 'being touched' and entering into a prayerful state in which his perception of the world was transformed. Hence, the second stanza can be read as another instance of such a prayerful state experienced by the monk-speaker. The imagery that unfolds in the following lines is much darker than that of the first stanza, and it takes us deep into the earth, where God dwells in the form of a clump of roots out of which the speaker imagines himself to grow. This image not only defamiliarises the God of Italian painters, but also substantially revises the conventional perception of the relationship between the human and the divine.

The boundary between the human and the divine becomes blurred. The trunk and branches cannot exist without roots, which anchor them in the earth and provide them with water and nutrients, creating for them conditions to bear fruit. The fact that God and the speaker are both parts of a singular organic entity emphasises the harmonious nature of

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jungen Tizianen, | durch die der Gott in Gluten geht. || Doch wie ich mich auch in mich selber neige: | Mein Gott ist dunkel und wie ein Gewebe | von hundert Wurzeln, welche schweigsam trinken. | Nur, dass ich mich aus seiner Wärme hebe, | mehr weiß ich nicht, weil alle meine Zweige | tief unten ruhn und nur im Winde winken.' Rilke, 'Die Gebete', p. 308.

their relationship marked by close intimacy and mutual nurturing. The metaphoric image of God as ‘a clump | of a hundred roots’ emphasises also the multiplicity and heterogeneity of his being. He is dark, silent, and hidden deep underground, yet at the same time remains a source of the precious, life-giving water and uplifting ‘warmth’. Such a vision of a dark God, Rilke’s monk concedes, differs radically from the radiant divinity painted by the Italian artists and exceeds his comprehension. He admits: ‘more than this I don’t know’.

Similar to Rilke’s monk, Modernist theologians placed special emphasis on the idea of the ultimate incomprehensibility of God. While the neo-scholastic school, following Aquinas, maintained that certain ‘truths about God have been proved demonstratively by the philosophers, guided by the light of natural reason’, Modernist theologians were reluctant to admit that reason can give much insight into the nature of God.<sup>113</sup> Instead, they emphasised the role of faith and experience, and spoke of believing in and experiencing God as opposed to knowing and reasoning about God. The anti-Modernist Ronald Knox mocked this uneasiness of Modernists about the possibility of arriving at any definite knowledge of God in his limerick ‘The Modernist’s Prayer’: ‘O God, forasmuch as without Thee, | We are not enabled to doubt Thee, | Help us all by Thy grace | To convince the whole race | It knows nothing whatever about Thee.’<sup>114</sup>

In Rilke’s cycle, the darkness of God is often linked to the images of earth and organic growth. While speaking about his relationship with the divine, the monk repeatedly refers to images of ‘roots’ (poems 3, 5, 23, 34), ‘branches’ (poem 3), ‘trunks’ (poem 23), ‘trees’ (poems 3, 5, 59), ‘fruit’ (poems 31 and 34), ‘blossoming’ (poems 31 and 32), and ‘ground’ (poem 61). In the poems where such arboreal imagery is employed, God is most frequently associated with the roots of the tree of which the speaker forms the trunk and branches. Such organic imagery was not uncommon in Modernist theologians’

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<sup>113</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4 vols (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 1: *God*, trans. by Anton C. Pegis, ch. 3, n. 2, p. 63.

<sup>114</sup> Ronald Knox, ‘The Modernist’s Prayer’, quoted in Milton T. Walsh, *Ronald Knox as Apologist: Wit, Laughter, and the Popish Creed* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), p. 28.

writings. The understanding of the Christian doctrinal tradition as an organic entity that matures in history, first developed by the theologians associated with the Catholic School of Tübingen, was readily re-appropriated by Modernists.<sup>115</sup> Thus, Loisy put forward a dynamic vision of Christianity, arguing:

Why not find the essence of Christianity in the fullness and totality of its life, which shows movement and variety just because it is life, but inasmuch as it is life proceeding from an obviously powerful principle, has grown in accordance with a law which affirms at every step the initial force that may be called its physical essence revealed in all its manifestations? Why should the essence of a tree be held to be but a particle of the seed from which it has sprung, and why should it not be recognized as truly and fully in the complete tree as in the germ?<sup>116</sup>

The organic model of development, as John Thiel remarks, was ‘rooted in a tradition of biological imagery as old as the New Testament’ and offered theologians ‘a meaningful portrayal of development-in-continuity that conceives growth as the unfolding of a givenness’.<sup>117</sup> Both the Modernist concept of the unfolding of Christian revelation and Rilke’s poetic image of the ‘ripening of God’ are predicated on the assumption that either God’s nature is dynamic and not unchangeable (as neo-scholastics would maintain); or, alternatively, the human understanding of the unchangeable God is subject to evolution and doctrinal statements are historically contingent.

For the modern believer to accept such an idea and relate to the dark and hidden God of modernity who no longer reveals his splendour through glowing paintings is by no means undemanding. Rilke’s monk records his struggle with this dark vision in poem 48, which once again brings to the fore the theme of icon-painting:

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<sup>115</sup> See John E. Thiel, *Senses of Tradition: Continuity and Development in Catholic Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 56–67.

<sup>116</sup> Loisy, *The Gospel and the Church*, p. 16.

<sup>117</sup> Thiel, *Senses of Tradition*, p. 58.

I know: You're the mysterious one  
around whom time stood hesitantly still.  
O how beautifully I shaped You  
with my proud hand  
in the hour that punished me so.

I sketched many elegant drafts,  
faced all the hindrances –  
until these plans fell apart;  
the lines and rounded shapes  
became tangled like thornbushes  
until suddenly, deep within me  
from a thrust into uncertainty,  
the most pious of forms sprang forth.

I can't survey the breadth of my work,  
yet I feel that it stands now complete.  
But when I turn my eyes aside  
I want to build it once again.<sup>118</sup>

The speaker, just like Michelangelo in the poem discussed above, initially takes pride in his creative work. However, he is soon 'punished' for his self-contentment. His 'elegant drafts', and all the 'lines and round shapes' – which could be compared to neo-scholastic theologians' sophisticated theological arguments resting on 'elegant' and neat distinctions and classifications – when faced with the reality that he is trying to contain in his work, simply 'f[a]ll apart'. Their clarity and elegance are lost, turning into tortuous shapes resembling 'thornbushes'. They evoke confusion and incoherence and, furthermore, allude

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<sup>118</sup> Rilke, '[Poem 48]', in *Prayers of a Young Poet*, p. 83. 'Ich weiß: Du bist der Rätselhafte, | um den die Zeit so zögernd stand. | O wie so schön ich Dich erschaffte | in einer Stunde, die mich straffte, | in einer Hoffahrt meiner Hand. || Ich zeichnete viel ziere Risse, | behorchte alle Hindernisse, - | dann wurden mir die Plane krank; | es wirrten sich wie Dorngerank | die Linien und die Ovale, | bis tief in mir mit einem Male | aus einem Griff ins Ungewisse | die frommste aller Formen sprang. || Ich kann mein Werk nicht überschaun, | und fühle doch: es steht vollendet. | Aber, die Augen abgewendet, | will ich es immer wieder baun.' Rilke, 'Die Gebete', p. 345.

to the pain and humiliation Jesus had to endure when a crown of thorns was put on his head. The uncertainty caused by the shattering of the forms painstakingly created by the speaker, however, is a beginning of yet a new composition – ‘the most pious of forms’. It originates in his personal struggle with the ultimate unknowability and indeterminacy of God. It is ‘deep within’ himself that the monk finds the strength and humility to make a ‘thrust’ into the unknown.

After the monk has accomplished his ‘most pious of forms’, he nevertheless humbly acknowledges, that while it ‘feels’ to be complete, it is not and can never be. Since the static nature of the painting cannot render the dynamic and paradoxical nature of God, as it would need constant re-creation and re-working, the speaker’s endorsement of the failure of his project turns into his triumph. The poem eventually transforms his admission of failure into a humble celebration of the elusiveness of God. Unlike Michelangelo, Rilke’s monk is able to overcome his hubris. He learns to live with the knowledge that God inevitably upsets human conceptual and aesthetic frameworks, and will not be contained in ‘elegant drafts’. He is able to affirm God’s dark and paradoxical nature as liberating and offering space for modern believers’ creative personal responses to the divine.

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Rilke’s engagement with the ritual of Orthodox icon-veneration leads to his reclaiming of the relevance of this medieval Christian tradition to modernity. ‘The Book of Monastic Life’ presents the icon as a religious artefact that, due to its inherent features, needs to be constantly reinterpreted. Rilke thus elevates the value of creative Christian hermeneutics by means of which elements of past tradition, such as the icon, can be imbued with new life. His project displays a close affinity with Modernist theologians’ attempts to rethink

the body of Christian doctrine and revise the accepted interpretations of symbolic expressions of faith; and thus to reclaim what they perceived to be the inherent inner dynamism of Christian tradition. The question of how far such a reinterpretation can proceed, as the following chapter will show, was a major theme of Eliot's reflections on mystical experience and its relation to the Christian dogmatic tradition.

In his later works, Rilke continued to explore the theme of a human encounter with the transcendent. The monk's circling around God in 'The Book of Hours' can be read in parallel with the poet's dialogic encounter with the angel in *Duino Elegies* (1912–1922). Even though the elegies mark a different stage in Rilke's life and poetic career, and contain hardly any direct references to Christian tradition, they offer a powerful meditation on how human experience can be related to transcendent reality. Compared to 'the mystic's struggle' that leads to a recognition that 'the imponderability of the angel does not annul or deny the human', the elegies can indeed be read as a continuation of the monk's exploration of the distance between the human and the transcendent.<sup>119</sup> The distance that has become especially acute in modernity – ever since 'the days of Tobias' passed.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Patricia H. Stanley and Jonathan Flaum, 'Rilke's *Duino Elegies*: An Alternative Approach to the Study of Mysticism', in *Unreading Rilke: Unorthodox Approaches to a Cultural Myth*, ed. by Harmut Heep (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), pp. 77–91 (pp. 80, 86). See also Kathleen L. Komar, *Transcending Angels: Rainer Maria Rilke's 'Duino Elegies'* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1987).

<sup>120</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, 'The Second Elegy', in *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. and trans. by Stephen Mitchell (New York: Random House, 1982), pp. 156–161 (l. 3).

### Chapter 3

#### **‘Raid[s] on the absolute’: Dogmatic Tradition and Mystical Experience in T. S. Eliot’s Poetry and Criticism**

‘[T]o reduce the world to a set of formulae is to let it slip through our fingers in a fine dust; but to fly into an emotional orgy or retire into a sunlit stupor is to let the world slip through our fingers in a thin smoke. Between the two extremes is found the subject-matter of conversation, upon which intelligence feeds.’

T. S. Eliot, ‘The Relativity of the Moral Judgment’, [1915]<sup>1</sup>

Since in the Preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes* (1928) Eliot announced that he wished to make his present position clear and presented his readers with a collection of essays whose ‘general view may be described as classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion’, his readers and critics have been constantly confronted with the question of how to approach his public profession of Christian faith and, more importantly, how to determine the degree of relevance it bears to our understanding of his writings.<sup>2</sup> One prominent, yet highly problematic, type of critical response has been the refusal to acknowledge the sincerity of Eliot’s statement or the value of his belief. Symptomatic of such an attitude is Virginia Woolf’s remark made in a letter to her sister:

I have had a most shameful and distressing interview with poor dear Tom Eliot, who may be called dead to us all from this day forward. He has become an Anglo-

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<sup>1</sup> T. S. Eliot, [Ethics], TS [Oxford, n.d.], T. S. Eliot Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Am 1691.14 (32), p. 2; recently published as ‘The Relativity of the Moral Judgment’, in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition*, ed. by Ronald Schuchard, 8 vols (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014– ), I: *Apprentice Years, 1905–1918*, ed. by Jewel Spears Brooker and Ronald Schuchard (2014), pp. 197–215, in *Project MUSE* <<http://muse.jhu.edu/>> [accessed 23 July 2014].

<sup>2</sup> Eliot, *For Lancelot Andrewes*, p. ix.

Catholic, believes in God and immortality, and goes to church. I was really shocked. A corpse would seem to me more credible than he is. I mean, there's something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God.<sup>3</sup>

While Woolf's reaction could be seen as typical of the largely atheist Bloomsbury Group, whose members often explicitly criticised religion, this kind of outlook is not uncommon among contemporary critics either. For instance, in his recent *The Modern Dilemma: Wallace Stevens, T. S. Eliot, and Humanism* (2008), Leon Surette claims that 'it is difficult to see how an individual of Eliot's education and intellect *could* believe unqualifiedly in Christian doctrine'.<sup>4</sup> Such an approach precludes the possibility of a serious and in-depth discussion of Eliot's poetry and literary criticism, as it refuses to engage with the religious context in which they originated. As John Freeh observes:

This is precisely the context that many critics shun, perhaps because of prejudice against it, or perhaps because they have therein too little interest. But neither these nor any other reasons provide sufficient excuse to side-step the issue, for to ignore it is to miss the greater part of Eliot. It matters not at all whether one accepts or agrees with Eliot's view; it matters vitally whether one acknowledges and understands it, for without such acknowledgement and understanding, we are left with a partial and unfinished portrait of the man and his work.<sup>5</sup>

In this chapter I aim to engage with this neglected aspect of Eliot's work, and show that his interest in religion and theology was deeper and its influence on his poetry and criticism more sustained than it has been recognised. I aim to show that issues that were at the heart of theological debates of the period – the possibility and value of mystical experience, the problem of its interpretation, the relation between mysticism and

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<sup>3</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'Letter to Vanessa Bell, 11 February 1928', in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Nigel Nicholson and Joanne Trautmann, 6 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1975–1980), III: *1923–1928: A Change of Perspective* (1977), pp. 456–458 (pp. 457–458).

<sup>4</sup> Surette, p. 238.

<sup>5</sup> John Freeh, 'Pericles and "Marina": T. S. Eliot's Search for the Transcendent in Late Shakespeare', in *Shakespeare's Last Plays: Essays in Literature and Politics*, ed. by Stephen W. Smith and Travis Curtright (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002), pp. 111–136 (p. 112).

systematic theology, religious interpretation of the dialectic between appearance and reality – were among the problems Eliot got increasingly interested in during the period he spent at Harvard University as a graduate student in philosophy, and kept continually returning to both in his poetry and prose. They surface for the first time in his Harvard essays and notes on mysticism, reappear in his reviews of theological and religious literature written for the *International Journal of Ethics* in 1916–1918, recur again in his contributions to the debate with John Middleton Murry, and in the series of Clark Lectures (1926), Charles Eliot Norton Lectures (1932–1933), and Turnbull Lectures (1933) delivered at Cambridge, Harvard and Johns Hopkins Universities respectively. The questions Eliot found so compelling included crucial issues discussed in the debates surrounding the Modernist crisis in the Roman Catholic Church, of which Eliot became aware in the early 1910s. The period when Eliot started his literary career was rich in religious debate from both the Roman Catholic and the Anglican perspective; it brought numerous works that attempted to reassess the theological controversy that broke out in the previous decade. A number of theological issues were widely debated not only within theologians' and religious intellectuals' circles, but also in leading newspapers and magazines. *The Times* regularly informed its readers about the development of the controversy in the Vatican and inside the Church of England, and in 1922 one of its contributors wrote that only somebody 'who has buried his head like an ostrich in the sand' could have 'heard nothing of the Modernist school in the English Church.'<sup>6</sup> It is hardly surprising then that Eliot went as far as to state that 'since the early seventeenth century there has been no age of such acute theological controversy as is our own'.<sup>7</sup> He closely followed the theological debates, and when in the 1920s they began touching on the question of aesthetics, with Jacques Maritain publishing *Art et Scolastique* in 1920, and Henri Bremond putting forward his theory of 'pure poetry' in 1925, Eliot used the

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<sup>6</sup> Percy Gardner, 'Shaken Creeds: Reasoned Certainty or Tradition', *The Times*, 19 January 1922, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'An Emotional Unity', *The Dial*, 84.2 (February 1928), 109–112 (p. 110).

*Criterion* as a forum that would introduce what he considered to be the debates' key points to English readers.

Considering the fact that Eliot showed such a deep and long-lasting interest in problems relating to religion and theology, regarding his baptism and confirmation into the Church of England in 1927 as a break with, or even betrayal of, his earlier scepticism for the sake of what some critics view as the 'solace of dogma' seems quite specious.<sup>8</sup> As Barry Spurr has recently argued, even the term 'conversion' – if employed without appropriate qualifications – may distort the image of Eliot's journey of faith, since it 'tends to diminish the importance of the diverse elements that led up to his baptism and confirmation over so many years and, by implying certitude and finality, contradicts Eliot's conception of the individual Christian's experience (especially in the modern age) as a much more complex phenomenon'.<sup>9</sup> In a letter to Paul Elmer More of 3 August 1929, Eliot commented on his turn to Christianity in a way that substantiates Spurr's point:

Most critics appear to think that my catholicism is merely an escape or an evasion, certainly a defeat. I acknowledge the difficulty of a positive Christianity nowadays; and I can only say that the dangers pointed out, and my own weaknesses, have been apparent to me long before my critics noticed them. But it [is] rather trying to be supposed to have settled oneself in an easy chair, when one has just begun a long journey afoot.<sup>10</sup>

This chapter aims to historicise Eliot's 'long journey afoot', and to situate it within the context of theological debates originating in the Modernist crisis. I argue that the issues discussed by theologians and religious thinkers provided Eliot with a springboard for a poetic exploration of the key points of contention, such as questions of how to interpret

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<sup>8</sup> Manju Jain, *T. S. Eliot and American Philosophy: The Harvard Years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. xi.

<sup>9</sup> Barry Spurr, 'Religion', in *T. S. Eliot in Context*, ed. by Jason Harding (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 305–315 (p. 305).

<sup>10</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Letter to Paul Elmer More, 3 August 1929', in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, iv, pp. 566–568 (p. 567).

religious and mystical experiences, and how to conceptualise their relation to the Christian dogmatic tradition. I have chosen to focus on four poems: ‘The Death of Saint Narcissus’ (1914/1915), ‘Gerontion’ (1920), ‘Journey of the Magi’ (1927) and ‘Marina’ (1930). Written over the span of fifteen years, they create four poetic personas that reflect Eliot’s preoccupation with the question of religious experience, and register important shifts in his thinking on this subject.

The chapter opens with a discussion of Eliot’s early interest in the interpretations of religious experience, which he vigorously pursued in the Harvard Philosophy Department. Eliot’s academic essays from the Harvard period show close familiarity with contemporary academic treatments of the origin and value of religion, and display a critical approach to sociological and psychological theories that attempt to explain religion by means of its outward form, such as rituals of worship, while ignoring its inner, personal meaning. The tension between the outer and inner meaning of religious experience, I suggest, is translated into a poetic form in ‘The Death of Saint Narcissus’. Narcissus presents a would-be saint who follows the call he hears and goes into the wilderness to become a ‘dancer before God’. His religious experience is portrayed in a highly ambivalent manner, and the last verses show him ‘green, dry and stained’. The poem leaves the question of how to understand his experience unresolved.

Dissatisfied with contemporary scholarly explanations of religious experience, Eliot did extensive reading in theological and devotional literature, paying particular attention to studies of mysticism. He became familiar with the issues lying at the heart of the Modernist controversy. The reviews he wrote in 1915–1918 reveal his critical attitude towards the idea of ‘modernising’ Christian doctrine, which he increasingly perceives as a crucial hermeneutic framework for understanding religious experience. He considers contemporary philosophers’ outright rejection of traditional theological thinking in their interpretations of religious experience just another type of dogma – ‘the dogma that we

must do without dogmas'.<sup>11</sup> It results in a loss of direct contact with tradition and leads to a conviction that, as 'Gerontion' puts it, history '[g]ives too late | What's not believed in'. The poem portrays a post-war generation who can no longer recognise the signs given unto them. Gerontion himself, engaging in endless petty deliberations, fails to grasp the meaning of the coming of 'Christ the tiger' and remains 'a dry brain in a dry season', probably never to see the rain for which he is waiting.

In the 1920s, when the meaning of the dogma of the Incarnation became a matter for debate for Anglican Modernists, Eliot engaged in an exchange with John Middleton Murry, who largely sympathised with the Modernist movement. Murry argued for the recognition of the value of the 'inner voice' and rejected institutionalised Christianity due to what he considered its excessive attachment to ossified dogmas that in the course of time have lost their meaning. Eliot disagreed with Murry, comparing him to Spanish mystics, whose religious experiences he came to consider a 'spiritual haschisch'. Eliot's 'Journey of the Magi', I suggest, can be read as his poetic response to Murry's rejection of the dogma of the Incarnation in his book *The Life of Jesus* (1926).

The final section of the chapter discusses the Maritain-Bremond debate, mentioned in chapter one. It traces Eliot's engagement with Jacques Maritain's neo-Thomist aesthetics in the late 1920s and his subsequent re-evaluation of Henri Bremond's theory of 'pure poetry' in the early 1930s. This fundamental shift in Eliot's thinking about the relationship between religion and poetry can be seen in his appreciation of G. Wilson Knight's reading of Shakespeare's dramas as mystical works and, I suggest, is reflected in the poetic language of 'Marina'.

While numerous works have acknowledged the significance of Eliot's interest in philosophy for understanding his poetry and criticism, not many studies have directly

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<sup>11</sup> T. S. Eliot, [Relation between Politics and Metaphysics], MS [n.p., n.d.], T. S. Eliot Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Am 1691 (25), pp. 10–11; recently published as '[The Relationship between Politics and Metaphysics]', in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot*, 1, pp. 90–105, in *Project MUSE* <<http://muse.jhu.edu/>> [accessed 23 July 2014].

addressed his engagement with religion.<sup>12</sup> Of these latter few, the most recent and complete one is Barry Spurr's *'Anglo-Catholic in Religion': T. S. Eliot in Christianity*, which offers an in-depth discussion of the Anglo-Catholicism that Eliot endorsed in terms of its history, liturgy and devotional practices.<sup>13</sup> Even this study, however, does not explore theological issues discussed in the period, and Spurr only briefly mentions the debates between Anglo-Catholic and Modernist theologians. Spurr's primary objective is to present an 'informed understanding of Anglo-Catholicism in general', thus he does not provide any detailed discussion of the way in which it could be viewed as informing Eliot's writings.

Surprisingly few critics have drawn attention to the theological debates that Eliot engaged with. Donald J. Childs in *T. S. Eliot: Mystic, Son and Lover* devotes a chapter to theological Modernism and Pragmatism as crucial to shaping Eliot's thinking about mystical experience.<sup>14</sup> The direction in which he develops his overall argument, however, significantly differs from my focus. Childs's aim is to arrive at a revised interpretation of Eliot's work 'so as to acknowledge the latently poststructural dimension of his sensibility'.<sup>15</sup> He proposes to interpret Eliot's interest in mysticism through the lens of psychoanalytical criticism, and to consider it a 'self-diagnosed mother-complex' that Eliot 'found himself sharing with D. H. Lawrence'.<sup>16</sup>

A further study that includes a brief discussion of the theological context informing Eliot's literary criticism is David Goldie's *A Critical Difference: T. S. Eliot and*

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<sup>12</sup> The most important studies addressing Eliot's engagement with philosophy include Manju Jain, *T. S. Eliot and American Philosophy: The Harvard Years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); M. A. R. Habib, *The Early T. S. Eliot and Western Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and Donald J. Childs, *From Philosophy to Poetry: T. S. Eliot's Study of Knowledge and Experience* (London: Athlone Press, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Barry Spurr, *'Anglo-Catholic in Religion': T. S. Eliot in Christianity* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Donald J. Childs, *T. S. Eliot: Mystic, Son and Lover* (London: Athlone Press, 1997), see esp. chapter 3: 'Modernism and Pragmatism', pp. 53–83.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xv.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xix.

*John Middleton Murry in English Literary Criticism, 1919–1928*.<sup>17</sup> Goldie’s work offers a comprehensive account of Eliot’s debate with Murry, and in the chapter that he devotes to what he calls the ‘religious phase’ of the debate (1926–1928), he draws attention to the way in which terms and ideas employed in theological debates were appropriated and subsequently used by both Murry and Eliot.

Religious interpretations of Eliot’s work have been presented by a number of critics adopting a variety of perspectives. Kristian Smidt’s *Poetry and Belief in the Work of T. S. Eliot* discusses Eliot’s philosophical background, with particular emphasis on the influence of Aristotle, Henri Bergson and F. H. Bradley on Eliot’s thinking. It offers a close analysis of Eliot’s poetic technique and an interpretation of the religious dimensions of *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*.<sup>18</sup> Paul Murray in *T. S. Eliot and Mysticism: The Secret History of Four Quartets* grounds his interpretation of *Four Quartets* in Eliot’s long-lasting preoccupation with mysticism and emphasises the Christian dimension of Eliot’s negativity and his strive to express ‘an incommunicable vision’.<sup>19</sup> Murray offers a reading of *Four Quartets* as a poem with a certain mystical insight, which he analyses through a detailed interpretation of numerous sources and contexts he considers crucial for the understanding of the poem. Eloise Knapp Hay in her study *T. S. Eliot’s Negative Way* takes a different approach. She puts emphasis on the negativity present in Eliot’s poetry and interprets it as a pattern that is separate from any single religious tradition, and can be interpreted as a Christian *via negativa* only in Eliot’s late works.<sup>20</sup> She proposes a radical re-reading of Eliot’s poetry, suggesting that his verse from before 1927, preoccupied with different forms of ‘sick spirituality’ and pathological mysticism, ‘bear[s]

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<sup>17</sup> David Goldie, *A Critical Difference: T. S. Eliot and John Middleton Murry in English Literary Criticism, 1919–1928* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), esp. chapter 3: ‘Orthodoxy and Modernism: The Claims of Religion, 1926–1928’, pp. 128–180.

<sup>18</sup> Kristian Smidt, *Poetry and Belief in the Work of T. S. Eliot*, rev. edn (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961).

<sup>19</sup> Paul Murray, *T. S. Eliot and Mysticism: The Secret History of ‘Four Quartets’* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991).

<sup>20</sup> Eloise Knapp Hay, *T. S. Eliot’s Negative Way* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

witness to a struggle against Christianity'.<sup>21</sup> While I acknowledge the importance of these studies, in this chapter I take a different approach, aiming for a deeper historical contextualisation of Eliot's preoccupation with ideas related to mystical and religious experience.

My discussion is informed by the invaluable studies of Eliot's intellectual development: Piers Gray's *T. S. Eliot's Intellectual and Poetic Development 1909–1922*, John H. Margolis's *T. S. Eliot's Intellectual Development 1922–1939*, and Manju Jain's *T. S. Eliot and American Philosophy: The Harvard Years*.<sup>22</sup> Gray's work, conceived as an 'intellectual biography', focuses primarily on the influence of Bradley's work and the philosophy courses Eliot took at Harvard, emphasising the dialectic of coherence and incoherence in Eliot's philosophical and religious thinking and poetry, as evidenced by Gray's analysis of *The Waste Land* and a few selected poems. Margolis explores Eliot's intellectual development in the period when he edited the *Criterion*, providing a valuable insight into Eliot's dissatisfaction with American Humanism, and his intellectual friendship with Paul Elmer More, who abandoned a Humanist viewpoint to become a Christian apologist. Manju Jain's work offers an account of Eliot's growing dissatisfaction with philosophy, and points to it as the genesis of his decision to renounce philosophy for poetry and religion. Jain's informative discussion, substantiated by a comprehensive interpretation of relevant archival material, makes this study a persuasive sketch of 'the contours of [Eliot's] movement towards belief'.<sup>23</sup> While these works do not tackle Eliot's engagement with theology in a comprehensive way, they give an important insight into his intellectual pursuits, thus providing a vital background for my discussion.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>22</sup> Piers Gray, *T. S. Eliot's Intellectual and Poetic Development 1909–1922* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982); John D. Margolis, *T. S. Eliot's Intellectual Development 1922–1939* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972); and Jain, *T. S. Eliot and American Philosophy*.

<sup>23</sup> Jain, p. xi.

Researching this chapter, I have found the manuscripts from Eliot's Harvard years and his recently published correspondence especially illuminating with respect to the development of his religious thinking, which, I argue, is crucial to the understanding of his poetry of 1915–1930. A large part of the material cited in this chapter has not yet been extensively discussed in print due to copyright restrictions. The manuscripts from Eliot's Harvard years, which include his notes on mysticism and philosophy essays, are held in the Houghton Library, Harvard University, and were not published at the time of writing this chapter.<sup>24</sup> Eliot's academic essays were included in the first volume of *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot* produced by the T. S. Eliot Editorial Project research group and published in July 2014. The Project also involves the publication of Eliot's letters, of which four volumes have appeared until now: a revised edition of volume 1 (1898–1922) and volume 2 (1923–1925) were published in 2009, volume 3 (1926–1927) in 2012, and volume 4 (1928–1929) in 2013; many more are to follow. It is the first time that this material has been made accessible to a wider community of researchers, and the potential impact it will have on the future of Eliot scholarship is immense. This material offers scholars a chance to look at the canonical figure that Eliot has become from a fresh perspective, and this is precisely the aim of this chapter.

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<sup>24</sup> In drafting the chapter, I relied on the manuscripts from the T. S. Eliot Collection that I worked with in the Houghton Library. After the first two volumes of *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition*, ed. by Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014) were made accessible through the Project MUSE database in July 2014, I revised my quotations from Eliot's Harvard essays in accordance with their published versions and added further references where appropriate.

## **‘In a wilderness of mirrors’: Eliot’s Early Encounters with Modernist Theology**

### *The Varieties of Mystical Experience*

T. S. Eliot was born and grew up in St Louis, Missouri, where his grandfather, William Greenleaf Eliot, settled down on graduating from Harvard Divinity School, to found the first Unitarian church in the region in 1834. While Eliot was born a year after his grandfather’s death in 1887, Lyndall Gordon points out that he would be raised in accord with the standard of conduct set by W. G. Eliot, whose religion ‘was strict rather than spiritual’, ‘not concerned with perfection, or doctrine, or theology, but with a code that would better the human lot’.<sup>25</sup> Young Eliot and his siblings were taught to place high value on the virtues of practicality, self-denial, and public service. Years later, Eliot responded critically to the religious dimension of his upbringing. He considered himself ‘brought up as an Atheist’, as he wrote in a letter to Bertrand Russell.<sup>26</sup> His home environment he would characterise as ‘that intellectual and puritanical rationalism which is found in the novels of George Eliot’, where Herbert Spencer’s theory of evolution is ‘regarded as the key to the mystery of the universe’.<sup>27</sup> Hence, as he later remarked, for him Unitarianism did not incorporate much that would qualify as Christian belief, and thus lay ‘outside the Christian fold’.<sup>28</sup> He recalled that:

in the form of Unitarianism in which I was instructed, things were either black or white. The Son and the Holy Ghost were not believed in, certainly; but they were

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<sup>25</sup> Lyndall Gordon, *The Imperfect Life of T. S. Eliot* (London: Virago, 2012), p. 18.

<sup>26</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘Letter to Bertrand Russell, 22 June 1927’, in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, III: 1926–1927, ed. by Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden (2012), p. 568.

<sup>27</sup> T. S. Eliot, *A Sermon Preached in Magdalene College Chapel* (Cambridge: [Cambridge] University Press, 1948), p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘Review of *Son of Woman: The Story of D. H. Lawrence* by John Middleton Murry’, *The Criterion*, 10.41 (July 1931), 768–774 (p. 771).

entitled to respect as entities in which many other people believed, and they were not to be employed as convenient phrases to embody any cloudy private religion.<sup>29</sup>

In 1905, Eliot was sent to Milton Academy, a prestigious boarding school in New England, from which he graduated the following year to start a philosophy degree at Harvard College. Living and studying in Boston and Cambridge, Massachusetts, Eliot identifies a peculiar trait of the place, which years later he calls ‘the Boston doubt’ and defines as ‘a scepticism which is difficult to explain to those who are not born to it. [...] a product, or a cause, or a concomitant, of Unitarianism; it is not destructive but it is dissolvent’.<sup>30</sup> This particular kind of scepticism, according to Eliot, drives people to study various disciplines but prevents them from putting complete trust in any one of them. Eliot’s concept of ‘the Boston doubt’ serves well to convey the sense of turmoil in the philosophy department where he did his degree. At that point philosophy as a discipline was on a crossroads, striving to define anew its methodology and subject of study. As James E. Miller observes:

The quarrels and discussions inspired by the advent in the middle of the nineteenth century of Charles Darwin’s ‘theory of evolution,’ in effect demonstrating that human beings had closer connections to animals than to angels, forced philosophy to redefine itself as an academic discipline. Philosophy found itself reassessing its traditional position as to the basic or fundamental body of knowledge of the university, forced to decide whether to encompass or ignore science and religion, which by many had come to seem – in the light of Darwinism – quite incompatible.<sup>31</sup>

The question of how to situate the study of philosophy in relation to science on the one hand, and religion on the other, was pressing, and had been tackled by various Harvard

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘A Sceptical Patrician: Review of *The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography*’, *The Athenaeum*, 23 May 1919, pp. 361–362 (p. 361).

<sup>31</sup> James E. Miller, *T. S. Eliot: The Making of an American Poet, 1888–1922* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), pp. 163–164.

philosophers since the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>32</sup> William James and Josiah Royce were among those who actively pursued the view that a philosophical reconciliation of science and religion was possible. When Eliot commenced his studies, the philosophy department was living through what Bruce Kuklick called its ‘Golden Age’, with new paradigms of knowledge and fresh methods of scholarly inquiry devised and discussed on a regular basis. Thus, the degree Eliot took, apart from courses in history of ancient and modern philosophy, metaphysics, ethics, and logic, included lectures and seminars in experimental psychology, Sanskrit, and Pali.<sup>33</sup>

Eliot attended seminars run by Irving Babbitt, Josiah Royce, and George Santayana, and the problems with which they challenged students stimulated Eliot’s thinking on the issue of the interpretation of religious experience. The question that preoccupied him was the following: if philosophy was to adopt scientific methods of inquiry consisting in a description of facts, and at the same time be capable of accounting for what is considered to be a religious experience, how can any reconciliation be reached?<sup>34</sup> Eliot addressed this problem in the poem ‘The Death of Saint Narcissus’, which I discuss below, and in the paper ‘The Interpretation of Primitive Ritual’, which he presented in Josiah Royce’s seminar in December 1913.<sup>35</sup>

In his paper, Eliot probes into the sociological and anthropological methods of describing religious experience employed by scholars belonging to the French school, including Émile Durkheim and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl. On examining their work, Eliot concludes that they confuse what can be considered as a ‘scientific definition’ of religion

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<sup>32</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the type of research conducted in Harvard’s Philosophy Department at the time when Eliot commenced his studies, see Bruce Kuklick, *The Rise of American Philosophy: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1860–1930* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), pp. 229–401.

<sup>33</sup> A complete list of courses that Eliot attended at Harvard is included in Jain, pp. 252–256.

<sup>34</sup> See Harry T. Costello, *Josiah Royce’s Seminar, 1913–1914: As Recorded in the Notebooks of Harry T. Costello*, ed. by Grover Smith (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1963), pp. 193–194.

<sup>35</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘The Interpretation of Primitive Ritual’, in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot*, 1, pp. 106–119, in *Project MUSE* <<http://muse.jhu.edu/>> [accessed 23 July 2014].

with its 'philosophic interpretation'.<sup>36</sup> While science should rest on facts, Eliot argues, in the case of religion it is hardly possible to obtain a set of neutral facts that could be regarded as research data. When Durkheim put emphasis on the objectiveness of social facts that for him consisted in observable behaviour and provided material for a scientific description, Eliot points to difficulties that such an approach creates, reducing the meaning of religion to its purely external expression and approaching it as yet another form of social behaviour. He contests Durkheim's method:

if you take a purely external point of view, then it is not behaviour but mechanism, and social phenomena (and ultimately, I believe, all phenomena) simply cease to exist when regarded steadfastly in this light. You must take into account the internal meaning: what is a religious phenomenon, for example, which has not a religious meaning for the participants?<sup>37</sup>

Even though Eliot points to the necessity of accounting for the 'internal meaning' of a religious act, he acknowledges that there is no reliable scientific methodology that would make it possible. He asserts that an individual's explanation of their religious behaviour cannot be accepted because it is not verifiable and 'in the scientific explanation the purposes of the people examined can never be taken on faith'.<sup>38</sup> Eliot thus reaches an aporia to which seemingly there is no satisfactory solution. To conceive of a science of religion that meets the standards of objectivity one needs to focus on the observable exteriority, yet such a methodology falsifies the description, as it obliterates its internal meaning. In the conclusion of his seminar paper Eliot admits that he could find no solution to this impasse:

I admit that I have no better methods to substitute, but I am sure that neither of these gives us what we are looking for. I do not think that any definition of

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

religious behaviour can be satisfactory, and yet you must assume, if you are to make a start at all, that all these phenomena have a common meaning; you must postulate your own attitude and interpret your so-called facts into it, and how can this be a science? And yet there is the material, and there must be a science of it.<sup>39</sup>

The question of the abundant material related to religious phenomena for which, from the scientific point of view, there was no adequate interpretative framework occupied Eliot throughout his Harvard years. In search for the answer to his question, he carried out an extensive research into one particular type of religious phenomenon – mysticism. The copious notes that he took provide a record of his reading, and make it possible to offer a brief outline of his exploration of various interpretations of mystical experience.<sup>40</sup>

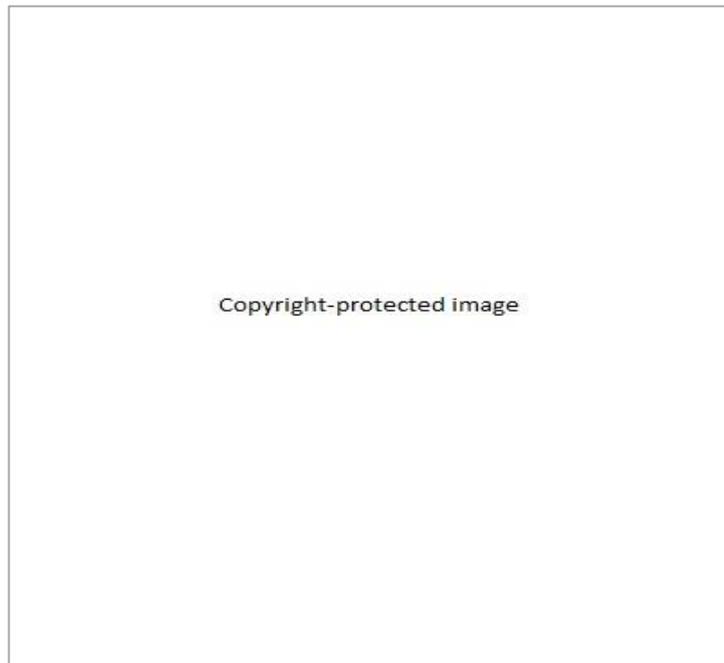


Figure 8. T. S. Eliot's hand-written notes on Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism*, c. 1912–1914. T. S. Eliot Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Am 1691 (129).

The works that Eliot studied can be broadly divided into two categories: works which are attempts at a scientific and psychological account of mysticism and those that offer

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>40</sup> Eliot's notes on mysticism recorded on fifty-nine 4x6-inch index cards are part of the T. S. Eliot Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Am 1691 (129). They have never been published.

spiritual and theological interpretations of mystical experiences.<sup>41</sup> Eliot's notes make it clear that one of the issues that he was primarily interested in was mystical visions and ecstasies, and the question of how to find a key to their interpretation, as well as the process through which mystics arrive at their visions and the physiological symptoms that accompany them. He records in his notes the details of visions experienced by Theresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, Bernard of Clairvoux, John of the Cross, Walter Hylton, and Madame Guyon alongside the details of experiments with nitrous oxide, ether, and other stimulants conducted by William James, and case studies of neurotic patients documented by Pierre Janet. Eliot's attention is drawn to the distinction between 'true' and 'false' or 'good' and 'bad' mysticisms that some of the authors he reads make in order to discriminate between various types of visions. He also takes note of the question of mystics' attitudes towards their visions, and the relationship of visions and ecstasies to theology. Reading William Inge's *Christian Mysticism*, Eliot records in his notes: 'The mystics as a rule do not attach high value to their visions.'<sup>42</sup> From Ernest Murisier's work, he notes down the statement that 'the visions are regarded as having been sent from God, but proper to a lower & transitory phase. They show that the soul is not completely turned in as it has already detached itself from the sensible world'.<sup>43</sup> Reading Underhill's work, he notes that 'the healthy mystic is generally an acceptor & not rejector of creeds', and '[t]here are good & bad forms of ecstasy; good is known by its effect for life'.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> The titles on which Eliot took more extensive notes include: *An Introduction to History of Religion* by F. B. Jevons, *Christian Mysticism* by Evelyn Underhill, *Christian Mysticism* and *Studies of English Mystics* by William Inge, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by William James, *Pathological Aspects of Religions* by Josiah Moses, *Névroses et idées fixes* [Neuroses and Obsessions] by Pierre Janet, *Maladies du Sentiment Religieux* [Diseases of the Religious Sentiment] by Ernest Murisier, *Études d'histoire et de psychologie du mysticisme* [Studies in the History and Psychology of Mysticism] by Henri Delacroix, and *Maladies et Facultés Diverses des Mystiques* [Diseases and Diverse Faculties of the Mystics] by Nestor Charbonnier. A full list of titles that Eliot recorded in his notes is included in Appendix 1 to Gordon's book, pp. 531–532.

<sup>42</sup> Eliot, MS Am 1691 (129).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* The quotation is from Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, 4th edn (London: Methuen & Co., 1912), p. 115.

Nearly every theological and devotional study of mysticism included in Eliot's reading list tries to establish a hermeneutic framework according to which it would be possible to determine the validity of a mystical vision or trance. Thus, Underhill argues (and Eliot records in his notes):

If we would cease, once for all, to regard visions & voices as objective, and be content to see in them forms of symbolic expression, ways in which the subconscious activity of the spiritual self reaches the surface mind, many of the disharmonies noticeable would fade away. Visionary experience [...] is a picture which the mind constructs [...] from raw materials already at its disposal.<sup>45</sup>

Underhill argues that mystics' visions are constructed from the elements of tradition of which they are part, and should be interpreted in accordance with the framework provided by that tradition, since it is often by the help of his spiritual ancestors that the mystic 'elucidates for himself the meaning of the dim perceptions of his amazed soul'.<sup>46</sup> The hermeneutic framework found in tradition allows one to discriminate between visions that Underhill calls 'the *media* by which the "seeing self" truly approaches the Absolute' and those that '[a]t best, [...] are but the result of the self's turning over her treasures: at worst, they are the dreams – sometimes the diseased dreams'.<sup>47</sup> In a similar fashion, William Inge in his discussion of Walter Hylton's work, observes:

As for the strange physical and psychical phenomena which sometimes accompany this state – sights and sounds and odours, a sensation of burning heat in the breast, apparitions of various kinds – Hylton bids us "be wary." He does not doubt that such things really take place, but it is by no means easy to determine whether they are sent by God or are a snare of the devil. The best test is to ask ourselves whether they tend to distract our minds from our devotions and from

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<sup>45</sup> Eliot, MS Am 1691 (129); Underhill, p. 325.

<sup>46</sup> Underhill, p. 542.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 323–324.

good actions. If they do, they are delusions sent by the Evil One, and should not be attended to. [...] The vision, like other things, must be known by its fruits.<sup>48</sup>

Thus the interpretative key proposed by Underhill and Inge is to measure the validity of mystical experience by placing it within the framework of spiritual tradition and theology, and evaluate the impact it has on the mystic's life and behaviour. It is not the vision itself that is to be evaluated, but its compliance with tradition and 'its fruits', or the manner in which it influences one's everyday actions.

The other perspective that Eliot assumed in his studies of religious experience, and that presented him with an almost completely antithetical interpretation of mystical experience was the psychological approach. The works on the psychology of religion that Eliot studied would interpret religious experience as a type of mental phenomenon, often of a pathological type, and include numerous case studies of diagnosed patients. Some of the authors, for example Edwin Diller Starbuck, attempted to account for both 'normal' and 'abnormal' religious experiences; others, like Josiah Moses, would focus solely on the 'pathological' side of religion. In this framework, experiences that could be interpreted as mystical according to theological standards, are mostly considered abnormal products of the human mind that mistakes its own fantasies for divine presence. Quoting the physician Max Nordau, Moses argues:

The word Mysticism describes a state of mind in which the subject imagines that he perceives or divines unknown and inexplicable relations among phenomena, discerns in things hints at mysteries, and regards them as symbols by which a dark power seeks to unveil, or at least to indicate, all sorts of marvels. [...] It is always connected with strong emotional excitement.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> William Ralph Inge, *Studies of English Mystics: St Margaret's Lectures, 1905* (London: John Murray, 1906), pp. 84–85.

<sup>49</sup> Josiah Moses, *Pathological Aspects of Religions* (Worcester, MA: Clark University Press, 1906), p. 69.

Among the characteristic features of mystical visions, Moses identifies ‘sexual disturbances’, and points to visions experienced by St Theresa of Avila, St Catherine of Siena, and St Gertrude. He argues that religion and sexuality are closely bound together and the erotic dimension is strongly present in religious visions and ecstasies. To corroborate his argument, Moses refers to Havelock Ellis’s interpretation of the relationship between love and religion:

The intimate association between the emotions of love and religion is well known to all those who are habitually brought into close contact with the phenomena of the religious life. Love and religion are the two most volcanic emotions to which the human organism is liable, and it is not surprising that when there is a disturbance in one of these spheres the vibrations should readily extend to the other. Nor is it surprising that the two emotions should have a dynamic relation to each other, and that the auto-erotic impulse being the more primitive and fundamental of the two impulses should be able to pass its unexpended energy over to the religious emotion, there to find the expansion hitherto denied it, the love of the human becoming the love of the divine.<sup>50</sup>

The most salient point of the psychological interpretations of religious and mystical experiences that Eliot studied is the emphasis put on the physiological reactions of those who have them. The commonly described symptoms include emotional arousal, heightened physiological activity, uncontrollable changes of moods, erotic hallucinations and ecstasies. They are considered products of the activity of minds that have become unstable due to a variety of life traumas, repressed desires, and other similar reasons.

To return to Eliot’s seminar paper on the issue of the interpretation of religious phenomena, it seems that neither the religious interpretations of mystical experience that Eliot studied, nor the psychological ones met the standards that he set for a ‘science of religion’. The religious interpretations did not attempt to identify objective facts that could

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

be studied in a scholarly manner – they immediately proceeded towards interpretation that would be in line with a given spiritual tradition; psychological interpretations focused primarily on physiological symptoms, but did not consider the inner meaning that the experience carried for a given individual. Thus, despite his extensive reading on the subject – as his fellow-student Harry T. Costello recorded in his notebook, in the academic year 1913–1914, Eliot’s whole year’s work ‘circled around’ the issue ‘of the truth of interpretations’ – Eliot did not seem to find a satisfactory answer to the question of how to interpret religious experience.<sup>51</sup>

*‘The Death of Saint Narcissus’*

The vexing question of the interpretation of religious experience to which Eliot failed to find a solution either in psychological works or in religious and devotional studies, is at the heart of one of his early poems – ‘The Death of Saint Narcissus’. The poem explores the blurred boundary between ‘true’ and ‘false’ mysticism, effectively showing how a single experience can be interpreted as both an ecstatic vision and a pathological delusion. Called by Ted Hughes ‘the first portrait, perhaps the only full-face portrait, of Eliot’s genius’, the poem occupies a peculiar place in Eliot’s oeuvre.<sup>52</sup> It is thought to have been written in 1914 or 1915, but it was published only thirty-five years later, in 1950. In 1915 Ezra Pound encouraged Eliot to publish it in the *Poetry* magazine and submitted it on his behalf, but at the last minute Eliot changed his mind and withdrew it from publication.<sup>53</sup> However, several lines of the poem, in a slightly altered form, were included in *The Waste*

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<sup>51</sup> Costello, pp. 193–194.

<sup>52</sup> Ted Hughes, *A Dancer to God: Tributes to T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber, 1992), p. 33.

<sup>53</sup> According to Valerie Eliot’s notes appended to T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts*, ed. by Valerie Eliot, rev. edn (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), Eliot did not remember when exactly he wrote the poem, but it could have been in early 1915. It was submitted to *Poetry* in August that year. The cancelled galley-proof is part of the Harriet Monroe Collection of the University of Chicago (see page 95, note 1). See also Vicki Mahaffey, “‘The Death of Saint Narcissus’ and “‘Ode’”: Two Suppressed Poems by T. S. Eliot”, *American Literature*, 50.4 (1979), 604–612.

*Land*.<sup>54</sup> The three versions of the poem available in print differ in details that shed light on the poem's creation and will be discussed where relevant.<sup>55</sup>

The title figure of Saint Narcissus combines the mythological Narcissus and the second-century Bishop of Jerusalem who withdrew to the desert after he was accused of wrong-doing by some members of his community.<sup>56</sup> Withdrawal into solitude, as Eliot learnt from his research into mysticism, provides an opportunity for undisturbed spiritual contemplation, but also, as Starbuck remarks, '[s]ome of the most marked pathological tendencies are shown in persons who are let alone'.<sup>57</sup> The poem, with the title alluding to traditional hagiographic narratives, yet instead of the expected phrase 'The Life of ...', placing the emphasis on St Narcissus's death, opens with a direct address to the reader: 'Come under the shadow of this gray rock – | Come in under the shadow of this gray rock' (1–2). The urgency conveyed through the repetition of the verse prepares the reader for the unusual promise that the speaker makes in the following lines:

And I will show you something different from either  
Your shadow sprawling over the sand at daybreak, or  
Your shadow leaping behind the fire against the red rock: (3–5)

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<sup>54</sup> Lines 1–5 of *The Death of Saint Narcissus* became lines 25–29 of *The Waste Land*. Ted Hughes remarked that '[i]n retrospect, *The Waste Land* can look like the full-term accouchement where this *Death of St. Narcissus* would be a surgical colour slide of an early stage of the foetus' (p. 33).

<sup>55</sup> The three versions of the poem are included in T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), pp. 605–606, and *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts*, [first draft], pp. 90–93; [fair copy], pp. 94–97. Unless otherwise indicated, quotations are from *The Complete Poems and Plays*, with line numbers given in parentheses.

<sup>56</sup> 'St. Narcissus was consecrated Bishop of Jerusalem about the year 180. He was already an old man, and God attested his merits by many miracles, which were long held in memory by the Christians of Jerusalem. One Holy Saturday in the church the faithful were in great trouble, because no oil could be found for the lamps which were used in the Paschal feast. St. Narcissus bade them draw water from a neighboring well, and, praying over it, told them to put it in the lamps. It was changed into oil, and long after some of this oil was preserved at Jerusalem in memory of the miracle. But the very virtue of the Saint made him enemies, and three wretched men charged him with an atrocious crime. They confirmed their testimony by horrible imprecations: the first prayed that he might perish by fire, the second that he might be wasted by leprosy, the third that he might be struck blind, if they charged their bishop falsely. The holy bishop had long desired a life of solitude, and he withdrew secretly into the desert'. *Lives of the Saints: With Reflections for Every Day in the Year, Compiled from Alban Butler's 'Lives of Saints'*, [ed. by John Dawson Shea] (New York: Benziger Brothers, [1894]), p. 346.

<sup>57</sup> Edwin Starbuck, *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Study of the Growth of Religious Consciousness*, preface by William James, 3rd edn (London: Walter Scott Publishing, 1911), p. 177.

The contrast introduced between the world of nature regulated by the sunrise and sunset cycle and what the speaker is about to show us suggests that it will be something transgressing the laws of nature – something that may pose a serious challenge to our cognitive and interpretative skills. In the last lines of the stanza, the speaker reveals what is to be found under the ‘gray rock’:

I will show you his bloody cloth and limbs  
And the gray shadow on his lips. (6–7)

The ‘bloody cloth’ and the ‘gray shadow’ on the lips of the corpse that the speaker describes – different from the shadows created by the sun – are deeply unsettling. They seem to indicate that he did not die a natural death, but met some tragic end.

However, as we move to the second stanza, the revelation of what happened to Saint Narcissus is postponed. Instead, the speaker commences with a narrative that presumably will account for the extraordinary character of this ‘different’ shadow on Narcissus’s lips:

He walked once between the sea and the high cliffs  
When the wind made him aware of his limbs smoothly passing each other  
And of his arms crossed over his breast.  
When he walked over the meadows  
He was stifled and soothed by his own rhythm.  
By the river  
His eyes were aware of the pointed corners of his eyes  
And his hands aware of the pointed tips of his fingers. (8–15)

The second stanza presents the awakening of Narcissus’s self-consciousness, which consists in a celebration of his body, its rhythm and sexuality, witnessed by no one but nature. This event proves to be of formative importance to Narcissus. It makes a dramatic impact on his life:

Struck down by such knowledge  
He could not live men's ways, but became a dancer before God.  
If he walked in city streets  
He seemed to tread on faces, convulsive thighs and knees.  
So he came out under the rock. (16–20)

The knowledge that Narcissus has attained separates him from other people. He is 'struck down' or – as the first draft of the poem reads – 'struck mad' by the awareness of his bodily beauty. The city where he feels to be treading 'on faces, convulsive thighs and knees' (20) in the first draft of the poem is named as Carthage (19).<sup>58</sup> Eliot accompanied his reference to Carthage in *The Waste Land* with a note referring readers to Book V of Augustine's *Confessions*:

To Carthage I came, where there sang all around me in my ears a cauldron of unholy loves. I loved not yet, yet I loved to love, and out of a deep-seated want, I hated myself for wanting not. [...] For within me was a famine of that inward food, Thyself, my God; yet, through that famine I was not hungered; but was without all longing for incorruptible sustenance, not because filled therewith, but the more empty, the more I loathed it. For this cause my soul was sickly and full of sores, it miserably cast itself forth, desiring to be scraped by the touch of objects of sense.<sup>59</sup>

The connection between Narcissus and Augustine is ambivalent. On the one hand, both seem to regard the city as 'a cauldron of unholy loves' where one cannot but succumb to the temptation of 'convulsive thighs and knees'; on the other hand, while Augustine confesses that he was too weak and his soul too 'sickly' to leave Carthage, Narcissus decides that he cannot 'live men's ways' and moves away to live in the desert 'under the rock', becoming 'a dancer to God'. Narcissus's life comes to a turning point that in

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<sup>58</sup> Although Carthage was removed from the final version of the poem, it appears again in *The Waste Land*'s 'Fire Sermon', which concludes in the lines: 'To Carthage then I came || Burning burning burning burning | O Lord Thou pluckest me out | O Lord Thou pluckest || burning'. T. S. Eliot, 'The Waste Land', in *The Complete Poems and Plays*, pp. 59–86 (ll. 307–311).

<sup>59</sup> Saint Augustine, *The Confessions of St Augustine*, trans. by Edward B. Pusey (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1909), p. 33.

traditional hagiographic narratives would be described as a point of conversion. However, the ambiguous image of ‘a dancer before God’ is open to a number of interpretations.

The dance of Narcissus can be viewed as an artistic expression of the knowledge of beauty that he has just acquired, aimed to glorify its creator, as well as a form of prayer, perhaps resembling Sufi whirling, which allows him to enter a meditative trance. Narcissus abandons *walking* in the city streets, which is part of ‘men’s ways’, to devote to himself to *dancing*, a more sublime and aesthetically sophisticated movement, presumably to the internal rhythm of his body that he discovered in the second stanza. This separates him from other people, making him feel different and driving him into the desert, ‘under the rock’. At the same time, the phrase ‘dancer before God’ appears to refer to a poem Eliot wrote about a year earlier, in June 1914 – ‘The Burnt Dancer’.<sup>60</sup> The dancer from the title is a black moth ‘caught in the circle of desire’ (3), having been distracted from ‘more vital virtues’ (6). The poem sets a dichotomy between the ‘yellow ring of flame’ in which the moth burns (1) and the ‘whiter flames that burn not’ from which it strayed (38). The ‘whiter flames’ come from ‘a distant star’ to which the moth, the ‘broken guest’, may not be able ever to return. If Narcissus’s dance is related to the moth’s, the third stanza is ambiguous, leaving open the question of whether through leaving the city and becoming a dancer in the desert he is able to overcome the temptations of the ‘unholy loves’ or if he, like the black moth, gets ‘caught in the circle of desire’, and becomes so enamoured with his own body that his dancing becomes just a form of autoerotic self-celebration.

The three stanzas that follow present a series of metamorphoses that Narcissus undergoes. First ‘he was sure that he had been a tree’ (21), then ‘he knew that he had been a fish’ (24), and finally ‘he had been a young girl | Caught in the woods by a drunken old man’ (28–29). The common element in all three visions is their autoeroticism: as a tree, Narcissus twists his branches and tangles his roots among each other; as a fish, he holds

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<sup>60</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘The Burnt Dancer’, in T. S. Eliot, *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909–1917*, ed. by Christopher Ricks (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), pp. 62–63.

tight in his fingers his 'slippery white belly', 'writhing in his own clutch' (25–26); as a girl raped by a drunken old man, he gets to know 'the taste of her own whiteness | The horror of her own smoothness' (30–31), and in the end feels 'drunken and old' (32). This series of visionary or hallucinatory transformations, which can be read as one desperate attempt at finding sexual satisfaction, is reminiscent of the anguished passion of the mythological Narcissus. In Ovid's account, when a sage prophet was consulted on Narcissus's birth, he prophesied that Narcissus may live until old age only '[i]f he ne'er know himself'.<sup>61</sup> The prophecy turns out to be true; when Narcissus rejects the affection that nymph Echo bestows upon him and is led by her to a pond where he sees his reflection on the water, he falls in love with himself, and, as Ovid says:

Unwittingly he desires himself; he praises, and is himself what he praises; and while he seeks, is sought; equally he kindles love and burns with love. How often did he offer vain kisses on the elusive pool? How often did he plunge his arms into the water seeking to clasp the neck he sees there, but did not clasp himself in them! What he sees he knows not; but that which he sees he burns for, and the same delusion mocks and allures his eyes.<sup>62</sup>

Ovid's Narcissus seeks fulfilment in gazing at his reflection on the water, and when he realises that he will never be able to obtain the object of his desire, he kills himself. Eliot's Narcissus uses dance as a means to reach satisfaction, and in this ecstatic movement experiences visions in which he turns into a plant, an animal, and a person of opposite sex, perhaps in search for a deeper, cosmic unity with the created world. None of these visions and transformations brings him ultimate fulfilment, which he reaches only in the last stanza:

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<sup>61</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, with an English translation by Frank Justus Miller, 2nd edn, 2 vols, Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heineman, 1946), I: Book III, l. 348.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, Book III, ll. 425–431.

So he became a dancer to God,  
Because his flesh was in love with the burning arrows  
He danced on the hot sand  
Until the arrows came.  
As he embraced them his white skin surrendered itself to the redness of blood, and  
satisfied him.  
Now he is green, dry and stained  
With the shadow in his mouth. (33–39)

Only the ‘burning arrows’ – presumably the rays of the scorching desert sun that seem like piercing arrows to sun-struck Narcissus – bring the satisfaction for which he longed. The erotic imagery of these lines (Narcissus’s flesh is ‘in love’ with the arrows, he ‘embraces’ them, his skin ‘surrenders’, he is ‘satisfied’) suggests that he surrenders to death in what could be called a loving way. He becomes an ‘acolyte of pain’ like the black moth from ‘The Burnt Dancer’. His dancing terminates in a complete, one could say masochistic, mortification of the flesh, which at the same time – from his point of view – can be seen as his final, triumphant dance in which he embraces death that will bring him closer to God.

In the last two lines of the stanza the voice of the speaker comes back to the fore again, pointing to Narcissus’s ‘green, dry and stained’ corpse, as if urging us to arrive at an interpretation of Narcissus’s experience. Did he suffer from hallucinations, as psychologists of religion would suggest? Was he a standard case of autoerotic obsession and narcissism (the term used for the first time in 1898 by Havelock Ellis)?<sup>63</sup> Or, perhaps, his dancing did have a deeper meaning, one that cannot be explored through the analysis of his external behaviour only, and after all it could be proved that he has claims to sainthood. The ambiguity of the poem lies precisely in the crux of the problem Eliot encountered in his studies of religious and mystical experience: Narcissus’s dance can be

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<sup>63</sup> Havelock Ellis, ‘Auto-Eroticism: A Psychological Study’, *Alienist and Neurologist*, 19 (1898), 260–299 (p. 280).

seen both as a destructive (and deluded) movement towards self-annihilation that leaves him 'green, dry and stained' and as a movement towards God, for whom he chooses the ascetic way of life in the desert and for whose sake he 'surrenders' to the 'burning arrows'. The interpretation depends on the hermeneutic framework one adopts.

Narcissus's story remains a suppressed intertext in *The Waste Land*, where what happened to him surfaces implicitly in the following lines from 'The Burial of the Dead':

There is shadow under this red rock,  
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),  
And I will show you something different from either  
Your shadow at morning striding behind you  
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;  
I will show you fear in a handful of dust. (25–30)

It remains open to interpretation whether the 'fear' is brought about by the horror evoked by Narcissus's self-destruction or by his daring dancing before God.

#### *Modernism, Neo-scholasticism, Bergsonism, Pragmatism*

The question of how to interpret religious and mystical experience that occupied Eliot during his Harvard years was one of the key points of contention in the Modernist controversy. Eliot might have become aware of the controversy soon after it broke out in 1907, as it featured in the biggest American newspapers. It seems safe to assume that he was familiar with it by 1910. The T. S. Eliot Collection of the Houghton Library includes the catalogue of Catholic books published by John Joseph McVey of Philadelphia that Eliot owned as a student at Harvard – it features a prominent advertisement of the first

American pamphlet written in refutation of Modernist theology.<sup>64</sup> The advertisement announces that *The Doctrine of Modernism and Its Refutation* by J. Godrycz (published by J. J. McVey in 1908) disproves the ideas held by the Modernists not by means of theological arguments, but ‘by an appeal to reason and to science’.

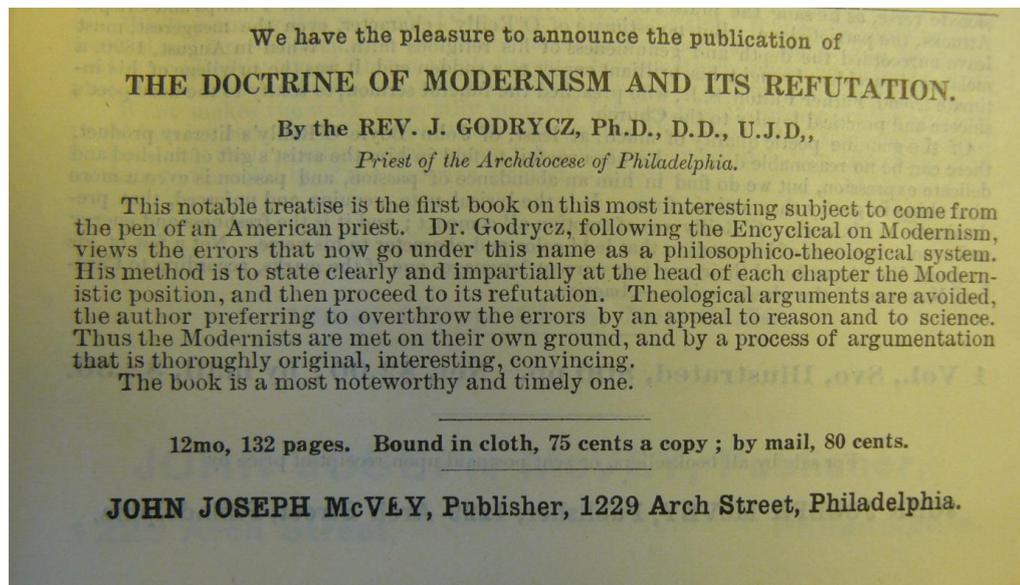


Figure 9. Advertisement from the *Catalogue of Catholic Books American and Imported, published and for sale by John Joseph McVey* (n.p.: n.d.) owned by T. S. Eliot. The catalogue is part of T. S. Eliot Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Am 2560 (118).

Eliot’s interest in the controversy grew during his stay in Paris in 1910–1911. As he later recalled, the year that he spent studying at the Sorbonne was the time when ‘at the Collège de France, Loisy enjoyed his somewhat scandalous distinction’.<sup>65</sup> Eliot refers here to Alfred Loisy’s refusal to revoke his views after they were condemned by the *Pascendi* encyclical, and his subsequent excommunication from the Roman Catholic Church and election to the chair of history of religions at the Collège de France.<sup>66</sup> When neo-scholasticism – endorsed by Pope Pius X as a philosophy sanctioned by tradition and

<sup>64</sup> *Catalogue of Catholic Books American and Imported, published and for sale by John Joseph McVey* is part of T. S. Eliot Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Am 2560 (118). The catalogue is undated, but on the last page it features an advertisement that reads: ‘Just from the press: *Christ and the Gospel, or Jesus the Messiah and Son of God*, by the Rev. Marius Lepin, D.D.’ This title was published in 1910; hence, one could assume that the catalogue was printed c. 1910–1911.

<sup>65</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘A Commentary’, *The Criterion*, 13.52 (April 1934), 451–454 (pp. 451–452).

<sup>66</sup> See chapter 1, section 3: ‘The “New Wine” of Modernism and the “Old Scholastic Bottles”’.

grounded in reason and, thus, capable of countering Modernist theology – was gaining momentum in Europe, Eliot deepened his knowledge of its roots, studying and teaching medieval scholasticism. He was appointed teaching assistant in philosophy at Harvard in academic years 1912–1913 and 1913–1914, and was asked to teach an introductory course in philosophy that included three seminars devoted to the discussion of the rise, culmination and decline of scholasticism.<sup>67</sup> The Jesuit Joseph Rickaby's *Scholasticism*, which was one of the required readings, apart from providing a historical account of thirteenth-century rise of scholasticism, traces its inheritance into contemporary times, pointing to the significance of 'the Leonine Revival of 1879', against which Modernist theology was a reaction.<sup>68</sup> Rickaby makes two predictions about the future of scholasticism: '(1) Scholasticism will return; (2) It will not return as it was in the Middle Ages. In other words, what will come back will be Neo-Scholasticism'.<sup>69</sup> According to him, neo-scholasticism should consist in an informed reinterpretation of Aquinas's teaching; following 'a living, not a dead Thomas'.<sup>70</sup> Rickaby sets clear limits to this work of reinterpretation, stating that the body of the Church dogma does not fall within its scope. The neo-scholastic theologian, in Rickaby's view:

must unsay without reserve whatever it is certain that St. Thomas, were he now living, would unsay; and that is whatever is in manifest contradiction with the valid

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<sup>67</sup> The list of recommended readings for the course that Eliot taught included: *History of Scholasticism*, by Maurice de Wulf, influential Belgian Thomist, *Scholasticism* by Joseph John Rickaby, British Jesuit, *Proslogium* by St Anselm and *Of God and His Creatures* by Thomas Aquinas, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Augustine's *Confessions*, and Bonaventura's *Life of St Francis*. *Philosophy A, Conferences and Reading* from the Harvard College Program of Studies, 1913–1914, with Eliot's autograph manuscript annotations, T. S. Eliot Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Am 2560 (99).

<sup>68</sup> Rickaby quotes from Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, which called for the return to the teachings of Aquinas and more in-depth study of his texts, warning against some of the more recent reinterpretations of his philosophy: 'take care that the wisdom of Thomas be drunk in from his own fountains, or at least from those streams which, in the certain and unanimous opinion of learned men, may be said to flow thence still uncontaminated and undefiled; but from streams that are said thence to flow, but really are swollen with foreign and unwholesome contributions, take care to keep your young students minds away.' Joseph Rickaby, *Scholasticism* (London: Constable, 1911), p. 81. Eliot refers to Rickaby's book with approval in his review of Peter Coffey's *Epistemology*, 'A Contemporary Thomist', *New Statesman*, 10 (December 1917), 312, 314.

<sup>69</sup> Rickaby, pp. 90–91.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

and firm conclusions of science, e.g. Ptolemaic astronomy, the doctrines of the four elements, the four humours, and astral influences. [...] On the other hand, there are clear fixed principles which, living in no age of the world, would St. Thomas ever unsay. He would never unsay any of the dogmatic teachings of that Church which has numbered him among her Doctors.<sup>71</sup>

The idea of a philosophy that is, on the one hand, systematic and coherent, and on the other, offers a methodology that is suited to the study of religious experience, must have appealed to Eliot. As he remarked years later, what he thought to be '[t]he root cause of the vagaries of modern philosophy – and perhaps, though I was unconscious of it, the reason for my dissatisfaction with philosophy as a *profession* – I now believe to lie in the divorce of philosophy from theology'.<sup>72</sup> At the beginning of the century, neo-scholasticism promised to bring an end to this divorce and reconcile the two once again, reviving Aquinas's system, which itself was based on Aristotle's philosophic method. However, as demonstrated in chapter one, this attempt at a return to the medieval system was met with resistance on the part of Modernist theologians, who considered this project untenable. They argued that 'it is impossible to impose religious experience on the modern mind in the same forms as were adapted to the utterly medieval mind', pointing out that the Church 'cannot, and ought not to, pretend that the *Summa* of Aquinas answers to the exigencies of religious thought in the twentieth century'.<sup>73</sup>

Having acquired sound background knowledge of the history of the neo-scholastic movement, and having conducted extensive research into mysticism, Eliot would naturally become interested in the contemporary Modernism–neo-scholasticism debate. From early on he tended to side with the neo-scholastic thinkers, yet his stance towards Modernist theology was by no means unambiguous. It seems that he found some of their ideas,

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., pp. 93–94.

<sup>72</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Introduction', in Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, trans. by Alexander Dru (London: Faber and Faber, 1952), pp. 11–17 (pp. 14–15).

<sup>73</sup> *The Programme of Modernism: A Reply to the Encyclical of Pius X, 'Pascendi Dominici Gregis'*, trans. by George Tyrrell (London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1908), p. 6.

particularly the emphasis on importance of the inner meaning of religion (which he himself was careful to underscore in his seminar paper on primitive ritual) quite appealing. His early engagement with theological Modernists and increasing dissatisfaction with the philosophical strains he identified in their thought can be well exemplified by his encounter with Reverend Hastings Rashdall.

In the period when Eliot studied mysticism and taught seminars on scholasticism and neo-scholasticism, he also presided over the Harvard Philosophical Club.<sup>74</sup> The meetings of the Club were held twice a month, and every semester debates with chosen guest speakers were organised. In the academic year 1913–1914, the list of special guests invited by the Club included Hastings Rashdall, Canon of Hereford Cathedral, who was to deliver a talk on 21 November 1913.<sup>75</sup> Rashdall was an influential Anglican Modernist theologian and Fellow of New College, Oxford, who advocated a radical rethinking of the notions of dogma and doctrine, as well as the concepts of good and evil. He developed his arguments in works such as *Doctrine and Development* (1898), *The Theory of Good and Evil* (1907), and *Philosophy and Religion* (1910). In 1913 he was working on his next book, *Is Conscience an Emotion? Three Lectures on Recent Ethical Theories* (1914). Since in 1913 Eliot was the president of the Club, it can be assumed that he approved of or perhaps even proposed inviting Rashdall for a talk, as the issues Rashdall tackled in his work definitely spoke to Eliot's interests. If the members of the Club had read or discussed Rashdall's work in preparation for his visit, Eliot would have probably found Rashdall's exposition of the relationship between psychology and religion very pertinent to his own problem of the interpretation of religious experience:

I would venture to add a word of caution against the tendency fashionable in many quarters to talk of basing religious belief upon Psychology. [...] It cannot possibly

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<sup>74</sup> Eliot is named President of the Club in the printed *Announcement* for the academic year 1913–1914. T. S. Eliot Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Am 2560 (99).

<sup>75</sup> The list of guest speakers with the dates of their talks is printed on the third page of the *Announcement*, MS Am 2560 (99).

tell us whether the beliefs which are found [in the human mind] are true or false. An erroneous belief is as much a psychological fact as a true one. [...] The idea of a Religion which is merely based upon Psychology and involves nothing else is a delusion: all the great Religions of the world have been, among other things, metaphysical systems.<sup>76</sup>

Yet the way Anglican Rashdall approaches metaphysics significantly differs from Catholic neo-scholasticism that Eliot studied and taught. Rashdall proposes to divorce theology from dogma, so as to make it compatible with modern methods of scholarly enquiry. As he argues:

Wise books, not in dogma but in theology, may [...] be described as the supreme need of our day, for only such can save us from much fanaticism and secure us in the full possession of a sober and sane reason. [...] These books then, – which have all to be written by men who have lived in the full blaze of modern light, – though without having either their eyes burned out or their souls scorched into insensibility, – are intended to present God in relation to Man and Man in relation to God.<sup>77</sup>

The title of the talk that Rashdall was to deliver at Harvard was not revealed in the *Announcement* of the Philosophical Club, yet one could speculate that Eliot found himself in disagreement with Rashdall's arguments, as one of the first texts he wrote for the *International Journal of Ethics* three years later was a scathing review of Rashdall's most recent book, *Conscience and Christ: Six Lectures on Christian Ethics*.<sup>78</sup>

In his review, Eliot openly attacks what he considers to be Rashdall's pragmatist outlook hidden under the guise of theology and leading to the conflation of the divine and the human. While Eliot admits that Rashdall is 'distinguished both as a Christian and as a

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<sup>76</sup> Hastings Rashdall, *Philosophy and Religion: Six Lectures Delivered at Cambridge* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), pp. 111–116.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. v–vi.

<sup>78</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Review of *Conscience and Christ: Six Lectures on Christian Ethics* by Hastings Rashdall', *International Journal of Ethics*, 27.1 (1916), pp. 111–112.

moral philosopher’, he goes on to argue that Rashdall gradually assimilates Christ’s teaching to the conscience that consists in ‘the usual structure of prejudices of the enlightened middle classes’.<sup>79</sup> Quoting Rashdall’s argument that stated that a certain part of Christ’s teaching ‘would require some correction before it could be literally applied to the case of those who do not believe that the world is just coming to an end,’ Eliot retorts: ‘All that is anarchic, or unsafe or disconcerting in what Jesus said and did is either denied, or boiled away by the “principle of development.”’<sup>80</sup> The danger of approaching the principle of development as an idea of the ultimate value, according to Eliot, is that it deprives truth of its absolute meaning.<sup>81</sup> He does not accept the pragmatist argument that ‘the “truth” of any particular proposition *means* a number of other things, its consistency with other “truths,” its influence upon our behaviour, its success in leading to a desired end’.<sup>82</sup> On these grounds, Eliot argues against what he perceives to be Rashdall’s assimilation of Christ’s teaching ‘to [Rashdall’s] own morality.’ He mocks Rashdall’s attempt to make the following of Christ ‘easier’ by concluding: ‘Certain saints found the

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>81</sup> In other reviews Eliot writes in this period, he equally strongly opposes the application of the principle of development to religion. He also refutes any attempts to account for the meaning of religion by means of its function in society along the lines drawn by Émile Durkheim. In his review of Wundt’s *Elements of Folk Psychology*, he asks: ‘What, exactly, are the permanent factors which permit us to regard the “development of humanity” as the thread to string our historical and geographical account of man upon?’ T. S. Eliot, ‘Review of *Elements of Folk Psychology: Outlines of a Psychological History of the Development of Mankind* by Wilhelm Wundt’, *International Journal of Ethics*, 27.2 (1917), 252–254 (p. 253).

<sup>82</sup> This understanding of truth as having an absolute and unchangeable value was, I suggest, crucial for Eliot. Several years later, he would accuse Murry of relativism similar to the one he disapproved of in the philosophy of pragmatism, stating: ‘what bothers me especially in Mr. Murry’s fluid world is that Truth itself seems to change, either imperceptibly or by sudden mutations. That I simply cannot understand.’ T. S. Eliot, ‘Mr. Middleton Murry’s Synthesis’, *The Criterion*, 6.4 (October 1927), 340–347 (p. 346).

Eliot expounded on this point once again in a lecture delivered to the Boston Association of Unitarian Clergy in 1932. He argued: ‘What happens when you trim your ideals down to fit the behaviour of the nicest people? Instead of compromising practice you have compromised the ideal, and that is a more serious matter. When you think that you are getting rid of hypocrisy, you are merely descending to complacency and self-conceit: an ideal which can be attained is the most dangerous of booby-traps, for its attainment leads to spiritual pride. ... We can have no ideal, for all human beings, lower than that of saintliness – in the exact sense. And this is the ideal which the world has repudiated, as being inhuman. Ideals are inhuman, but we are only human, instead of being animals, by our capacity to transcend humanity.’ T. S. Eliot, ‘Two Masters’, MS and TS, T. S. Eliot Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Ms Am 1691 (134a).

following of Christ very hard, but modern methods have facilitated everything. Yet I am not sure, after reading modern theology, that the pale Galilean has conquered.’<sup>83</sup> Eliot’s strong objection to Rashdall’s interpretation of modern Christian ethics is all the more interesting when considered in parallel with Eliot’s essay on ethics written (most probably) a year earlier.<sup>84</sup>

In his paper, Eliot endorses what he calls a ‘naturalistic or biological attitude in ethics’.<sup>85</sup> He maintains that while it cannot be claimed that biology is able to explain value, he believes that ‘any system of value is built up on feelings, ~~and that feeling is the ultimate criterion,~~ and that as our feeling changes, so will that which is valuable always be something else’.<sup>86</sup> Eliot understands ‘feeling’ as the product of various insights:

the feeling may sometimes be said to be the result of an intellectual insight and [...] sometimes the insight may be said to spring from the feeling; but [...] ultimately we have no better criterion (for rightness) than what each one feels to be right.<sup>87</sup>

The assertion that the ultimate or, in fact, the only feasible criterion for rightness is one’s feelings is not very different from Rashdall’s. Yet the crucial difference between Eliot’s and Rashdall’s theses is that Eliot reaches his conclusion on the ground of purely secular ethics, while Rashdall is professing to construct a Christian vision of ethical life. What Eliot finds unacceptable in his argument is that Rashdall, in Eliot’s view, dispenses with the metaphysical perspective and the notion of absolute values and, instead, settles with a pragmatist vision of values that are fluid and changeable. Even more outrageous to Eliot is the mental turn that Rashdall makes when he pronounces the ‘continuous teaching of

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<sup>83</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘Review of *Conscience and Christ*’, p. 112.

<sup>84</sup> Eliot, [Ethics], MS Am 1691.14 (32).

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4. Words crossed out by Eliot (in pencil).

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10. The phrase in the bracket added by Eliot (in pencil).

Conscience' to contain 'a progressive and evolving revelation – of God'.<sup>88</sup> Thus, Rashdall's argument that Christian ethics needs to evolve and move with the times is legitimised by the fact that this evolution is in fact an ongoing revelation of God. This thesis Eliot finds unacceptable as, according to him, it compromises Christian religion. His review touches upon several issues – such as the understanding of revelation, the importance of dogmatic tradition, and the role of individual conscience – which were constantly disputed in the Modernism–neo-scholasticism debate. In his review Eliot takes the neo-scholastic side, denouncing Modernist Rashdall as a 'pragmatist'.

It has been noted that the Modernist crisis 'generated an abundance of umbrella terms to denote heterodox philosophical and theological tenets', pragmatism being one of them.<sup>89</sup> The term was employed by the neo-scholastic circles as a pejorative label meant to discredit theologians who were considered unorthodox. Neo-scholastic thinkers feared that if Christian ethics adopted the pragmatists' emphasis on the value of individual conscience and inner life, it would mean that what had been considered the external standards of religion – a set of complex dogmas and doctrines – would become dispensable. While Eliot's strong reaction against Rashdall may be partly attributed to the power of neo-scholastic rhetoric permeating the debate that he was following, it needs to be acknowledged that his philosophical background allowed him to engage more deeply with pragmatic philosophy and its interpretation of the notions of truth and value.

Eliot's dissatisfaction with pragmatism was already visible in his Harvard period, and his final rejection of this school of thought came around 1913–1914. In the paper on 'Relation between Metaphysics and Politics' delivered before the Philosophical Society

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<sup>88</sup> Hastings Rashdall, *Conscience and Christ: Six Lectures on Christian Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916), p. ix.

<sup>89</sup> Clara Ginther, "'Notre attitude en face du Pragmatisme": George Tyrrell's Relation to Pragmatism', in *The Reception of Pragmatism in France and the Rise of Roman Catholic Modernism, 1890–1914*, ed. by David G. Schultenover (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), pp. 185–216 (p. 186). See also Michael J. Kerlin, 'Blondel and Pragmatism: Truth as the Real Adequation of Mind and Life', in the same collection, pp. 122–142.

of Harvard, Eliot vehemently rejected both William James's and Henri Bergson's thought.<sup>90</sup> He objected to contemporary philosophy on the grounds of it being an 'uncritical attempt to be critical, its feeling of the need for law at the same time that it denies law'.<sup>91</sup> According to Eliot, this could be seen in philosophy's search for 'an intellectual justification for anti-intellectualism' and 'a metaphysical justification of its blind enthusiasm'.<sup>92</sup> The diagnosis of the malaise of contemporary philosophy that Eliot makes points to its endorsement of 'the most dangerous of dogmas – the dogma that we must do without dogmas'.<sup>93</sup> This, Eliot argues, leads to 'two great modern fallacies: the fallacy of progress, which is the Bergsonian fallacy, and the fallacy of the Relativity of knowledge, which is the Pragmatic fallacy'.<sup>94</sup> Eliot's objections to Bergsonism's and pragmatism's uncritical rejection of 'dogmas' consist in an observation that while they dispose of the traditional ontological and ethical Absolute, they do not hesitate to put forward their own Absolutes – progress and relativity respectively. This Eliot considers to be the blind spot that underlines their systems. While he acknowledges the differences between the two systems, he argues that ultimately they both lead to philosophical pessimism, in which the balance between 'human meaning' and 'cosmic meaning' is upset:

Bergson denies human values; for Pragmatism man is the measure of all things. The latter is a 'practical' philosophy. You choose a point of view because you like it. You form certain plans because they express your character. Certain things are true because they are what you need; others, because they are what you want. Yet the two philosophies, like all antithetical philosophies, tend to meet. For they both reduce the world to illusion. For Bergson history is a vitalistic process in which human purposes do not exist; for Pragmatism, a chaotic process in which human

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<sup>90</sup> T. S. Eliot, [Relation between Politics and Metaphysics], MS Am 1691 (25).

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

purposes are illusory. For if all meaning is human meaning, then there is no meaning.<sup>95</sup>

Eliot's ultimate rejection of pragmatism is a result of his disapproval of the substitution of the absolute value of truth – being the basis of traditional metaphysical systems – with notions such as 'development', 'progress', and 'usefulness'. His rejection of Bergsonism is connected to his conviction that by 'hypostasis[ing] the impulses', Bergson turns life into an abstraction and loses his hold on social reality.<sup>96</sup> Ultimately, according to Eliot, the systems offered by James and Bergson are 'two forms of escape from reality as we know it in ordinary experience'.<sup>97</sup> Bergson's abstract terms, Eliot argues, elevate the elusive *élan vital* to the principal force governing life, while James's emphasis on progress, need, and satisfaction exalts the instrumental to the level of the metaphysical; thus, they both avoid confronting 'reality'.

The conclusion Eliot reaches is important in that it touches upon one of the core issues of the Modernist controversy. Modernist theologians levelled very similar objections against neo-scholasticism, contesting its tendency to ignore reality as it is known in ordinary experience in favour of abstract speculation. Bergson and James, while their philosophies were not unequivocally endorsed by all Modernist theologians, were nevertheless hailed as thinkers who return to the exploration of ordinary 'reality'. And yet, Eliot argues, their approach can be viewed as equally abstract and futile. Instead of devising a way that would make it possible to approach truth without renouncing ordinary experience, which consists in 'a constant friction between the mechanical and the

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., pp. 20–21.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 12. It needs to be acknowledged that when Eliot attended Bergson's lectures in Paris in 1910–1911, he initially found his philosophy appealing, and years later would even speak of his 'temporary conversion to Bergsonism'. Yet the papers he wrote as a graduate student in philosophy at Harvard and Oxford in 1913–1915 show his increasingly critical attitude towards Bergson. In a review of G. W. Cunningham's *A Study in the Philosophy of Bergson* (published in September 1916 in the *Westminster Gazette*), Eliot observed that 'one needs great patience and sympathy to discover anything of value in Bergsonism'. The first quotation is from Eliot, *A Sermon preached in Magdalene College Chapel*, p. 5. The second quotation is from Eliot, 'Bergson: A Review of *A Study in the Philosophy of Bergson* by G. W. Cunningham', in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot*, I, pp. 425–427, (pp. 425–426).

<sup>97</sup> Eliot, [The Relation between Politics and Metaphysics], p. 22.

volitional’, they impose on reality their own visions of truth – visions that exalt either ‘mechanism’ or ‘impulse’.<sup>98</sup> It is, thus, impossible to construct any coherent ethical system in which human behaviour could be judged according to external standards. Hence, as Eliot observes in his analysis of Rashdall’s pragmatic Christianity, the notion of ‘truth’ has lost its traditional value and anything that seems ‘anarchic, or unsafe or disconcerting’ can be freely reinterpreted.

Eliot’s final disillusion with philosophy took place in 1915, when he finished his doctoral dissertation on the idealism of Francis Herbert Bradley.<sup>99</sup> From the ethical point of view, Bradley’s system promised to offer a solution to problems posed by pragmatists’ instrumental view of truth.<sup>100</sup> However, Eliot soon became dissatisfied with Bradley’s thought and with his own thesis. He reported on the progress of his research to his friend Norbert Wiener in a letter of 6 January 1915:

I took a piece of fairly technical philosophy for my thesis, and my relativism made me see so many sides to questions that I became hopelessly involved, and wrote a thesis perfectly unintelligible to anyone but myself; and so I wished to rewrite it. It’s about Bradley’s theory of judgment, and I think the second version will be entirely destructive. I shall attack first ‘Reality’ second ‘Idea’ or ideal content, and then try to show sufficient reason for attempting to get along without any theory of judgment whatsoever. In other words, there are many objects in the world [...] which can be handled as things sufficiently for ordinary purposes, but not *exactly* enough to be subject matter for science – no definition of judgment, that is, is

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> The dissertation was published in 1964 as *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964). Eliot sent the final version of the dissertation to Harvard, but did not return to the United States to take his final examinations and, as a result, was not awarded the doctoral degree. For a discussion of Eliot and Bradley, see Childs, *From Philosophy to Poetry*; Jane Mallinson, *T. S. Eliot’s Interpretation of F. H. Bradley: Seven Essays* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 2002); and Jewel Spears Brooker, ‘F. H. Bradley’s Doctrine of Experience in T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*’, *Modern Philology*, 77.2 (1979), 146–157 (repr. in Jewel Spear Brooker, *Mastery and Escape: T. S. Eliot and the Dialectic of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), pp. 191–206).

<sup>100</sup> For Bradley’s refutation of the ethics of pragmatism, see *Essays on Truth and Reality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1914), esp. chapter 4: ‘On Truth and Practice’, pp. 65–106.

formally either right or wrong; and it simply is a waste of time to define judgment at all.<sup>101</sup>

The insistence with which Eliot demanded that if ‘there is the material, and there must be a science of it’ in his seminar paper in 1913 has changed into a mood of resigned acceptance that in certain situations devising a satisfactory criteria for making a scientific judgement is not possible. The recognition that the number of objects that are ‘not *exactly* enough to be subject matter for science’ may be quite high, was probably one of the reasons why Eliot became disillusioned with philosophy as a scholarly discipline. In the same letter, Eliot describes ‘all philosophising’ as ‘a perversion of reality’:

It has no working by which we can test it. It is an attempt to organise the confused and the contradictory world of common sense, and an attempt which invariably meets with failure – and with partial success. It invariably involves cramming both feet into one shoe: almost every philosophy seems to begin as a revolt of common sense against some other theory, and ends – as it becomes itself more developed and approaches completeness – by itself becoming equally preposterous – to everyone but its author. The theories are certainly, all of them, implicit in the inexact experience of every day, but once extracted they make the world appear as strange as Bottom in his ass’s head.<sup>102</sup>

In a passage that quite clearly anticipates his future life choices, Eliot reflects on his personal understanding of the difficulties of contemporary philosophy:

I am quite ready to admit that the lesson of relativism is: to avoid philosophy and devote oneself to either *real* art or *real* science. [...] For *me*, as for Santayana, philosophy is chiefly literary criticism and conversation about life [...]. The only

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<sup>101</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘Letter to Norbert Wiener, 6 January 1915’, in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, 1: 1898–1922, rev. edn, ed. by Valerie Eliot and Hugh Haughton (2009), pp. 86–89 (p. 89).

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 86–87.

reason why relativism does not do away with philosophy altogether, after all, is that there is no such thing to abolish! There is art, and there is science.<sup>103</sup>

Eliot's evocation of George Santayana out of all the professors whose classes he attended at Harvard is telling. Santayana was keenly interested in aesthetics, in particular the relation between philosophy and poetry, discussed in *Three Philosophical Poets* (1910), and poetry and religion, to which he devoted *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (1900). The issues he wrote about would in a few years become key points of Eliot's debate with John Middleton Murry.

At the end of his philosophical career, Eliot would admit that even though philosophical enquiry often produces explanations that are 'lamentably deficient' and need to be 'maintained by faith', the value of philosophising may lie in the way one takes.<sup>104</sup> He argued that 'as the experience of the trip is what we are out for, the choice of the route is all important', adding that '[i]n reality our whole view of life is at stake in the finest shred of logic that we chop'.<sup>105</sup>

### 'Gerontion'

'Gerontion' is a poem in which the importance of the choice of the route one takes comes strongly to the fore.<sup>106</sup> It can be read as an insight into the mind of a thinker who becomes disillusioned with the route he has taken, yet, living in post-war modernity, cannot imagine any alternative path in which he could put his faith. He is unable to relate to the traditions of the past, perceiving history as treacherous and deceitful, and continues to wait for a sign that he shall probably never be given. As Edward Brunner points out, Gerontion's fate is

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>104</sup> T. S. Eliot, [The validity of artificial distinctions], TS [Oxford, n.d.], T. S. Eliot Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Am 1691.14 (27), p. 1; recently published as 'The Validity of Artificial Distinctions', in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot*, 1, pp. 187–192.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, p. 7.

<sup>106</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Gerontion', in *The Complete Poems and Plays*, pp. 37–39. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

not unlike that of Henry Adams (1838–1918), American historian, intellectual, and Harvard professor, whose autobiography Eliot reviewed for the *Athenaeum* in 1919, at the time when he was writing ‘Gerontion’.<sup>107</sup> Adams’s life and scholarly career probably appeared to Eliot to echo his own disillusionment with contemporary schools of philosophy. Reading about Adams’s life in retrospect one can see, Eliot asserted, that the root of his misery lay in the fact that ‘a great many things interested him; but he could believe in nothing’.<sup>108</sup> His propensity for over-analysing everything he learnt or experienced led to a situation in which ‘[w]herever this man stepped, the ground did not simply give way, it flew into particles’.<sup>109</sup> Eliot recognises in Adams elements of Puritan heritage, Unitarian upbringing, and the Boston taste for scepticism, with which he himself was distinctly familiar. What was missing in Adams’s pursuit of knowledge, according to Eliot, was enthusiasm and passion. In his final diagnosis of Adams’s condition, Eliot proposes that Adams’s ‘extreme sensitiveness to all the suggestions that dampen enthusiasm or dispel conviction may be responsible for what one feels in him as immaturity, indeed as a lack of personality; an instability’.<sup>110</sup>

The ‘lack of personality’ and integrity are qualities that critics have repeatedly highlighted in their discussions of ‘Gerontion’; hence, I propose to read this text as a poetic reflection on a condition of a modern thinker who tries to find the key to interpret his position in the world and in history.<sup>111</sup> One of the most crucial problems he needs to address is to decide what place Christian religion with its dogmas, seemingly incompatible with modernity, would occupy in his life. Since Gerontion (whose Greek name translates as a ‘little old man’) belongs to the World War I generation, the questions he poses can be

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<sup>107</sup> Edward Brunner, “‘Gerontion’: The Mind of Postwar Europe and the Mind(s) of Eliot”, in *A Companion to T. S. Eliot*, ed. by David E. Chinitz (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 145–156.

<sup>108</sup> Eliot, ‘A Sceptical Patrician’, p. 361.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 361–362.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 362.

<sup>111</sup> For instance, Brunner draws attention to Gerontion’s ‘blurred identity’, and points out: ‘Just who he is, where he stands, what he represents, and why he is known only generically [...] are ongoing problems’ (p. 146).

viewed as having a sense of urgency and despair with which people who saw their world crumble seek answers that would restore meaning to their lives.

The two epigraphs with which Eliot opened the poem (the second epigraph is present in the original typescript but it was suppressed in the final version) suggest an otherworldly dimension to Gerontion's monologue. The first epigraph comes from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*: 'Thou hast nor youth nor age | But as it were an after dinner sleep | Dreaming of both' (III.1.32–34). These are the words uttered by the Duke who visits the imprisoned Claudio and, in a friar's disguise, urges Claudio to abandon hope and focus on the futility and meaninglessness of life. The second epigraph comes from Dante's *Inferno*: 'Come il mi corpo stea | Nel mondo su, nulla scienza porto' ('How my body stands in the world above, I have no knowledge', XXXIII.121–122). These words are spoken by Friar Alberigo, whom Dante meets in the ninth circle of Hell, where he is suffering for a treacherous murder of his relatives, Manfred and his son. To punish Fra Alberigo for his evil deed the devils took his soul to Hell but left his living body on earth, where it has been possessed by demons.

What connects the two epigraphs is the figure of the friar – a monk who is supposed to serve others for the glory of God. In the first one, a person disguised as a friar urges a hopeful prisoner to be 'absolute for death'; in the second one, a real friar poisons his relatives to take his revenge. One could connect these two figures with the poem in a number of ways; I propose to think of them as examples of Christian religion being deprived of its meaning by people driven by earthly ambitions. Even though they present themselves as Christians in their outward appearance, their actions are deceptive and essentially un-Christian, and may well serve as a warning against taking the words spoken by Gerontion at their face value, without probing into their possible hidden meanings. It may happen that a friar's frock, like that of Alberigo, hides corrupted or devilish thoughts.

The first and the final lines of the poem comprise a framework built around the theme of dryness: Gerontion begins his speech with the words ‘Here I am, an old man in a dry month’ (1), and concludes it with the verse ‘Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season’ (74). Gerontion’s desiccation and absorption in thought stand in stark contrast to the passion and sensuality of Narcissus. In the first stanza, Gerontion speaks primarily of his non-participation in the war, but reveals also a few details about himself: he is taken care of by a boy who reads to him and a woman who ‘keeps the kitchen, makes tea, | Sneezes at evening’ (13–14). The only activity in which he seems to be actively involved is ‘waiting for rain’ (2), the source of life-stirring water that could be a cure for Gerontion’s dryness. His waiting, however, is modified by a qualification introduced in the second stanza:

Signs are taken for wonders. ‘We would see a sign!’  
 The word within a word, unable to speak a word,  
 Swaddled with darkness. In the juvescence of the year  
 Came Christ the tiger (16–19)

References to Lancelot Andrewes’s *Nativity Sermons* that Eliot wrote about in the essay ‘Preacher as an Artist’ (1919) seem to suggest that even if Gerontion could see a sign that would have the power to bring his ‘dry season’ to an end, he would either not understand it or refuse to follow it.<sup>112</sup>

In his Nativity Day Sermon of 1618, Andrewes, whom Eliot in his review praises as ‘a writer of genius’,<sup>113</sup> discusses a passage from Luke 2.12–14, introducing a distinction between *Christus natus*, Christ who is born, and *Christus inventus*, Christ who is born to be sought by people.<sup>114</sup> As Andrewes argues, Christ’s birth does not mean much unless

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<sup>112</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘Preacher as an Artist’, *The Athenaeum*, 28 November 1919, pp. 1252–1253.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1252.

<sup>114</sup> Lancelot Andrewes, ‘Sermon XII’, in Lancelot Andrewes, *Seventeen Sermons on the Nativity*, new edn (London: Griffith, Farran & Co., [1898]), pp. 193–211. Eliot recommended *Seventeen Sermons on the Nativity*, in which Andrewes approaches the Incarnation from several different perspectives, as a good introduction to Andrewes’s writings. See T. S. Eliot, ‘Lancelot Andrewes’, in *Selected Essays*, pp.

He is found: '[w]e shall not be better for *natus est*, if we find him not.'<sup>115</sup> It is not possible to find Him, however, unless one receives a sign where to seek: 'So come we from *Christus natus* to *Christus signatus*. *Natus* "born," to be found; *Signatus*, "signed and marked," that He may be found.'<sup>116</sup> In his long meditation on the nature of the sign, Andrewes discusses the signs given in the Gospel – the Angel's speech to the shepherds and the star that the Magi saw – and those that his contemporaries can look for in their own times. The latter, he argues is '*signum humile, signum humilis* [...] we shall find Him by that sign, where we find humility, and not fail; and where that is not, be sure we shall never find Him'.<sup>117</sup> At the same time, Andrewes issues a warning against mistaking signs for wonders, quoting the disbelieving Pharisees who demand miracles of Jesus: 'Signs are taken for wonders. "Master, we would fain see a sign," (Matthew 12.38), that is a miracle.'<sup>118</sup> And yet, Andrewes ponders, if the Pharisees had looked more deeply into the nature of the sign of the cratch, they would have seen how miraculous it was: God as a defenceless infant, '*Verbum infans*, the Word without a word; the eternal Word not able to speak a word'.<sup>119</sup> Andrewes points out that the cratch is also the sign of the Cross, hinting at Jesus's reply to the Pharisees: 'An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas' (Matthew 12.39). Thus, Andrewes argues, it is not the miracles but the sign of real humility – pointing to the Incarnation and the Resurrection – that should be sought. 'If it be well looked into,' he adds, 'it is able to strike any man into an ecstasy.'<sup>120</sup>

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341–353. In 'Sermon XII', Andrewes meditates on the following passage: 'And this shall be a sign unto you; ye shall find the Child swaddled, and laid in a cratch. And straightforward there was with the Angel a multitude of Heavenly soldiers, praising God, and saying, Glory be to God on high, and peace upon earth, and towards men good-will' (Luke 2.12–14), p. 193.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 195.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p. 194.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 200.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., pp. 200–201. In his essay on Lancelot Andrewes, Eliot misquotes this passage, writing: 'the word within a word, unable to speak a word'. Eliot, 'Lancelot Andrewes', p. 349.

<sup>120</sup> Andrewes, 'Sermon XII', p. 201.

The other sermon by Andrewes that ‘Gerontion’ alludes to is the Nativity Day Sermon of 1622, in which Andrewes meditates on the difficulties connected to the task of seeking the meaning to which the sign points.<sup>121</sup> He meditates on the Gospel narrative of the Magi setting out into the unknown to follow the star, and again contrasts their attitude with that of his contemporaries. He passionately argues (and Eliot quotes an excerpt from this passage as an example of Andrewes’s powerful poetic style):

And we, what should we have done? Sure these men of the East shall rise in judgment against the men of the West, that is us, and their faith against ours in this point. With them it was but *vidimus, venimus*; with us it would have been but *veniemus* at most. Our fashion is to see and see again before we stir a foot, specially if it be to the worship of Christ. No; but fairly have put it off to the spring of the year, till the days longer, and the ways fairer, and the weather warmer, till better travelling to Christ. Our Epiphany would sure have fallen in Easter-week at the soonest. [...] ever coming, never come. We love to make no very great haste. To other things perhaps; not to *adorare*, the place of the worship of God. Why should we? Christ is no wild-cat. What talk ye of twelve days?<sup>122</sup>

In his diagnosis of contemporary difficulties of belief, Andrewes criticises the lack of willingness to sacrifice one’s comfort and stability to embark on a journey that leads to a discovery of the meaning of the sign. This motif of passivity and inaction comes to the fore in ‘Gerontion’.

While ‘signs are taken for wonders’ and the generation of Pharisaic mindset looks out for miracles, comes ‘Christ the tiger’ – *Christus signatus* that is waiting to be interpreted, himself ‘unable to speak a word’. He is the word ‘swaddled with darkness’, which ‘the darkness comprehend[s] [...] not’ (John 1.5). The following stanza portrays

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<sup>121</sup> Lancelot Andrewes, ‘Sermon XV’, in *Seventeen Sermons on the Nativity*, pp. 245–259. The passage on which Andrewes meditates in this sermon is Matthew 2.1–2: ‘Behold there came wise men from the East to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is the King of the Jews that is born? For we have seen His star in the East, and are come to worship Him’, p. 245.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254. Eliot quotes the last two sentences in ‘Lancelot Andrewes’ as examples of phrases that ‘do not desert’ the reader of Andrewes’s prose (‘Lancelot Andrewes’, pp. 349–350).

this lack of comprehension of the significance of Christ's coming. 'The depraved May' (20) – the season of 'flowering judas' (20) – becomes the time when Christ is 'to be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk | Among whispers' (21–22). Those who take part in this quasi-Eucharistic event – Mr. Silvero, Hakagawa, Madame de Tornquist, Fräulein von Kulp – are, in Grover Smith's words, the 'shadow-like [...] inheritors of desolation'.<sup>123</sup> They take part in the Eucharistic ritual, but they seem not to be able to grasp its meaning. Mr. Silvero's name brings to mind the thirty pieces of silver for which Judas betrayed Jesus. His walking all night in the room can be seen as an expression of his restlessness and agitation. Fräulein von Kulp's name evokes a feeling of guilt – Latin *culpa* – and her 'hand on the door' (28) could be seen as a sign of disengagement and urge to once and for all free herself from all the demands that the Christian sign makes on her life. As Jewel Spears Brooker points out, their behaviour resembles that of the Pharisees, who would see 'the supreme sign, but their unbelief, inseparable from their learning, would prevent them from recognizing it'.<sup>124</sup> They would continue waiting for yet a more effective miracle.

In the following stanza, Gerontion, trying to account for this condition, ponders on the role that historical consciousness plays in one's life:

After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Think now  
 History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors  
 And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,  
 Guides us by vanities. Think now  
 She gives when our attention is distracted  
 And what she gives, gives with such supple confusions  
 That the giving famishes the craving. Gives too late  
 What's not believed in, or if still believed,  
 In memory only, reconsidered passion. Gives too soon  
 Into weak hands, what's thought can be dispensed with

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<sup>123</sup> Grover Smith, *T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays: A Study in Sources and Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 60.

<sup>124</sup> Brooker, *Mastery and Escape*, p. 96.

Till the refusal propagates a fear. Think  
Neither fear nor courage saves us. (32–43)

In this long meditation on history, Gerontion appears to be taking considerable effort to impose a pattern on his ideas and not lose the attention of his listener(s); the repetitive ‘Think now ... Think now ... Think ...’ seem to be aimed at persuading the reader to follow Gerontion’s train of thoughts and to assume his viewpoint. The monologue appears to be a response to the opening question, yet it does not answer it directly – rather makes a particular case. If by ‘such knowledge’ one understands the knowledge that Christian belief has evaporated from modernity, that the war experience deprived people of the remnants of their faith in God and Christian values, that signs have been given in vain and there is no one to probe into their meaning any more, that the sacrifice on the cross has become meaningless, is there still a way through which the post-war generation can find forgiveness?

Evading his own question, Gerontion attempts to account for the historical process that brought about ‘such knowledge’. He puts the blame on a personified figure of History, who ‘deceives’, ‘guides [...] by vanities’, ‘gives when our attention is distracted’, or gives either ‘too late’ or ‘too soon’. Those who reject the ultimate sign are presented as victims, puppets in a play directed by the omnipotent, malicious figure of History – the only active agent in Gerontion’s vision. When the rejection of the sign is complete, Gerontion realises, ‘neither fear nor courage’ can bring salvation. In post-war, post-Christian Europe, the boundary between ‘virtue’ and ‘vice’ has become alarmingly blurred, and it has become exceedingly difficult to state when taking another’s life can be considered a ‘crime’ and when ‘heroism’ (44–45). Most critics unanimously agree that the vision of history that Gerontion presents can be understood as ‘a rationalization of his own inability to act or

feel'.<sup>125</sup> He considers himself part of the generation duped by History into rejecting the sign of the cratch and the sign of the cross, and does not see any possibility of reclaiming the lost belief. For him, as Donald Childs argues, 'remoteness in time from the Passion is remoteness from the ground of faith: there is a gap between knowledge of a historical fact (an enervate origin) and living belief.'<sup>126</sup> The most that Gerontion thinks he can do is to grieve over the hopelessness of the modern condition.

The opening of the following stanza, describing the second coming of Christ the tiger – which, according to the Gospel narrative, would mark the Day of Judgement – brings about a rupture in Gerontion's patterned thoughts. And yet, after two sentences that promise to be a dramatic climax of the poem ('The tiger springs in the new year. Us he devours.' (47)), Gerontion resumes his deliberations as if the coming of Christ was an event of no consequence to him. He continues the pattern from the previous stanza: 'Think at last... Think at last...'. The reason for this anticlimactic reaction may be either his inability to grasp the meaning of the event or an outright refusal to engage with it.

While in the previous movement of the poem Gerontion's focus was on the loss of values that he and his generation have experienced, now he attempts to understand his loss of sensual passion. The addressee of his words is presumably a person with whom he was sexually engaged, with the 'stiffen[ing]' suggesting sexual intercourse (49), which nevertheless he considers not to have led to any 'conclusion' (48). He is trying to find a rational explanation for the failure of the relationship:

I that was near your heart was removed therefrom  
To lose beauty in terror, terror in inquisition.  
I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it  
Since what is kept must be adulterated?  
I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch:  
How should I use it for your closer contact? (54–59)

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<sup>125</sup> James Longenbach, *Modernist Poetics of History: Pound, Eliot, and the Sense of the Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 192.

<sup>126</sup> Childs, *T. S. Eliot: Mystic, Son, and Lover*, p. 97.

The relationship does not bring Gerontion satisfaction as he considers it irrevocably ‘adulterated’, which, as Childs suggests, may mean that Gerontion ‘feels betrayed not so much by his partner as by passion itself’.<sup>127</sup> Subsequently, he loses faith in any possibility of forming a lasting relationship.

Childs proposes to read Gerontion’s loss of ‘beauty in terror’, and ‘terror in inquisition’ in the context of Eliot’s review ‘Beyle and Balzac’ written at the time when he worked on the poem.<sup>128</sup> In the review, Eliot emphasises a special quality of Beyle’s and Flaubert’s prose that stems from their ‘discontent with the inevitable inadequacy of actual living to the passionate capacity’.<sup>129</sup> According to Eliot, both authors drew attention to ‘the indestructible barriers between one human being and another’, and could sense that below ‘the surface of existence’ there is ‘something [...] simple, terrible and unknown’ hidden.<sup>130</sup> This, in Eliot’s view, is ‘a “mysticism” not to be extracted from Balzac, or even from Miss Underhill’.<sup>131</sup> If Gerontion’s statement that he was near another person’s heart but the beauty of their relationship was lost in ‘terror’ is read as a moment of sudden awareness of the ‘indestructible barriers’ that exist between all human beings – a moment of illumination possibly approaching mystical experience – he subsequently loses it in an attempt to examine it and unravel its meaning. Gerontion ‘has missed the meaning’, Childs argues, ‘for the meaning is in the terror, not in the inquisition that displaces it’.<sup>132</sup> The disappointment that follows leads him to distrust the world of senses, and reduce his life to the world of ‘small deliberations’ (60) and a self-imposed solipsistic isolation ‘in a wilderness of mirrors’ (64).

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<sup>127</sup> Childs, *T. S. Eliot: Mystic, Son, and Lover*, p. 103.

<sup>128</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘Beyle and Balzac: Review of *A History of the French Novel, to the Close of the Nineteenth Century* by George Saintsbury’, *The Athenaeum*, 30 May 1919, pp. 392–393.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 393.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.* Ten years later Eliot would reiterate a similar thought in a personal letter to Paul Elmer More, writing of ‘the void that I find in the middle of all human happiness and all human relations, and which there is only one thing to fill. I am one whom this sense of void tends to drive towards asceticism or sensuality, and only Christianity helps to reconcile me to life’. ‘Letter to Paul Elmer More, 12 February 1929’, in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, iv, pp. 431–433 (pp. 432–433).

<sup>132</sup> Childs, *T. S. Eliot: Mystic, Son, and Lover*, p. 104.

The ending of the poem, which has puzzled a number of scholars, could be read as a glimpse into that incomprehensible wilderness:

De Bailhache, Fresca, Mrs. Cammel, whirled  
Beyond the circuit of the shuddering Bear  
In fractured atoms. Gull against the wind, in the windy straits  
Of Belle Isle, or running on the Horn,  
White feathers in the snow, the Gulf claims,  
And an old man driven by the Trades  
To a sleepy corner. (66–72)

The whirling of people who turn into ‘fractured atoms’ in Gerontion’s mind is reminiscent of Henry Adams’s world flying into ‘particles’. Their over-intellectualised deliberations lead to a point at which the knowledge they acquire and theories they construct – instead of enhancing their understanding of life – turn it into a chaotic accumulation of atoms. The final image of the stanza can be read as Gerontion’s wrestling with problems pertaining to the meaning of the world, yet his struggle resembles that of a single gull fighting against the powerful currents of wind, and ultimately dying in the snow to be washed away by the Gulf Stream. The struggle is futile and hopeless, and leads to yet another anti-climax – Gerontion falling asleep in his ‘sleepy corner’.

If one compares Gerontion with Narcissus, some striking similarities come to light. While the former retreats into his mental ‘wilderness of mirrors’, where he can be immersed in his own thoughts without being disturbed by the outer world, the latter can be thought of as entering a literal wilderness of the desert to pursue the beauty of his body discovered in the mirror-reflection on the water. One lives among the mirrors reflecting his thoughts, the other among mirrors reflecting his sensual beauty – in either case the route they choose verges on solipsistic self-sufficiency.

## Rethinking the Incarnation

In 1915 Eliot made a decision not to pursue a scholarly career in philosophy and not to return to the United States. With Ezra Pound's encouragement, he resolved to settle down in London and focus on writing poetry. However, he continued to follow the debates and works concerning mysticism, scholasticism, Modernism and neo-Thomism. Not much attention has been drawn to this fact in Eliot criticism. It is especially noteworthy that while Eliot abandoned philosophical speculation almost immediately after he finished his doctoral dissertation, he began reviewing works addressing various topics related to religion, beginning with theological works, to studies in sociology of religion, anthropology of religion, and philosophy of religion.<sup>133</sup> What is even more significant, it can be safely assumed that he chose most of these titles himself and they, to a large extent, reflect the topics in which he became particularly interested. In a letter to his mother, Eliot reported that he found Philip Jourdain, the editor of the *International Journal of Ethics* for which he wrote the reviews, 'the most satisfactory employer'.<sup>134</sup> He added: 'I have only to suggest an article, and he clamours for it, and any book I see advertised and want to review he will send for'.<sup>135</sup>

Furthermore, when Eliot began working for one of the Oxford University Extension Centres in 1916, he proposed to run a course on 'Tendencies of Contemporary

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<sup>133</sup> The titles that Eliot reviewed for the *International Journal of Ethics* between 1915–1918 included A. J. Balfour's *Theism and Humanism*, A. Wolf's *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*, Hastings Rashdall's *Conscience and Christ: Six Lectures on Christian Ethics*, Clement C. J. Webb's *Group Theories of Religion and the Religion of the Individual*, John Theodore Merz's *Religion and Science: A Philosophical Essay*, A. Clutton Brock's *The Ultimate Belief*, Wilhelm Wundt's *Elements of Folk Psychology. Outlines of a Psychological History of the Development of Mankind*, William Temple's *Mens Creatrix*, R. G. Collingwood's *Religion and Philosophy*, and Cardinal Mercier's *A Manual of Modern Scholastic Philosophy*. Eliot also published several reviews a philosophical and theological works in the *New Statesman*. The works he reviewed included William James's *Human Immortality: Two Supposed Objections to the Doctrine*, Peter Coffey's *Epistemology*, and May Sinclair's *A Defence of Idealism*.

<sup>134</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Letter to His Mother, 6 September 1916', in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, 1, pp. 163–165 (p. 163)

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

French Thought'. In the reading list for the course, he included Alfred Loisy's *The Gospel and the Church* and Paul Sabatier's *Modernism*.<sup>136</sup> Both of them were considered influential members of the Modernist school of theology. Sabatier's work provides an introduction into the main principles of Modernist theology, situating it in opposition to both 'anti-religious rationalism' and 'orthodox intellectualism'.<sup>137</sup> According to Sabatier, Modernism helps to re-situate religion on 'the plane of reality, of life, of experience' – it is 'an unexpected current of mysticism, passing over [the] age and giving an unspeakable fervour and power to those who drink of it'.<sup>138</sup> Sabatier in his work contests many points raised by the *Pascendi* encyclical, which was reprinted as an appendix to his book. Thus, towards the end of the 1910s, Eliot becomes familiar with the primary texts of the debate, which probably threw light on his own unanswered question of how to interpret religious experience. It is highly plausible that he read more extensively on the Modernism–neoscholasticism debate, as in his later commentaries, reviews, and letters, he mentions names of several leading thinkers associated with the controversy, including George Tyrrell, H. D. A. Major, William Temple, Friedrich von Hügel, Henri Bremond, and Édouard Le Roy.

In the 1920s, Eliot's engagement with the problem of the interpretation of religious experience becomes closely bound with the question of how to interpret Christian dogmas, in particular the dogma of the Incarnation. One of the most important Christian dogmas, included in both the Anglican creed (the Thirty-Nine Articles) and the Roman Catholic ones (the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed), the Incarnation became one of the key issues of Anglican theologians' debates concerning the possibility of a modern re-

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<sup>136</sup> The course was later renamed 'Modern French Literature'. See Ronald Schuchard, 'T. S. Eliot as an Extension Lecturer, 1916–1919', *Review of English Studies*, 25.98 (1974), 163–174 (repr. in Ronald Schuchard, *Eliot's Dark Angel: The Intersections of Life and Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 25–51).

<sup>137</sup> Paul Sabatier, *Modernism: The Jowett Lectures, 1908*, trans. by C. A. Miles (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), p. 27.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98. Sabatier goes on to criticise the Vatican's decision to excommunicate the modernists who refused to revoke their views, as according to him, this would 'no more save the Church [...] than such a general would save his army by shooting the men who are courageous enough to warn him of his errors' (pp. 46–47).

interpretation of creeds. Their disputes were widely reported by newspapers, engaging a broader public. These debates, I suggest, are crucial to the understanding of Eliot's investment in the dogma of the Incarnation. He debated its meaning with John Middleton Murry, and later poetically explored it in the series of the Ariel poems published in 1927–1930.

### *Reinterpreting the Creeds*

In 1912–1914, when Eliot was still a student at Harvard, he recorded in his notes, reading Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism*, that the theory of God's immanence is 'notoriously apt to degenerate into pantheism' if not corrected by the dogma of the Incarnation.<sup>139</sup> In her work, Underhill undertook a re-assessment and rehabilitation of the notion of individual religious experience after its value had been undermined by the *Pascendi* encyclical. Referring in more detail to the encyclical's lengthy discussion of Modernist theologians' misinterpretation of the theory of divine immanence, which, according to *Pascendi*, leads to the assertion of 'the identity of man with God, which means Pantheism,' Underhill asserts that the dogma of the Incarnation serves as a safeguard against such interpretations of the mystic's experience.<sup>140</sup> She agrees with the claims of Modernist theologians that dogmas are historically conditioned formulae that cannot hold the entire content of the individual's religious experience, and hence cannot be the only interpretative tools employed: 'Attempts to limit mystical truth – direct apprehension of the divine substance – are as futile as the attempts to identify a precious metal with the die which converts it into current coin.'<sup>141</sup> At the same time, however, she acknowledges (and Eliot records her

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<sup>139</sup> Underhill, p. 119.

<sup>140</sup> Pius X, *Pascendi*, p. 90, § 39.

<sup>141</sup> Underhill, p. 115. Eliot, MS Am 1691 (129).

point in his notes) that the individual's visions may indeed lead to distorted, 'false mysticism'; more often than not, however, the mystic is 'an acceptor and not a rejector of [...] creeds'.<sup>142</sup> According to Underhill, '[w]hether the dogmas of Christianity be or be not accepted on the scientific and historical plane, [...] those dogmas are necessary to an adequate description of mystical experience.'<sup>143</sup> She challenges scientific approaches to mystical experience on the grounds that they are too reductive and do not acknowledge mystics' belonging to a certain theological tradition, which provides interpretative tools more appropriate to those offered by science. Thus, she also touches upon the blind spot present in Eliot's early paper on primitive ritual, in which he argued for the inadequacy of the existing scientific methodology to explore the meaning of religious experience, yet at the same time he did not allow for the inner meaning of the experience as it is understood by the believer to be taken 'on faith'. Underhill points to yet another way of approaching the same problem, which is through the lens of tradition:

They are not isolated phenomena, but are related to one another. Each receives something from his predecessors: each by his personal adventures enriches it, and hands it on to the future. As we go on, we notice more and more this cumulative power of the past. Each mystic, original though he be, yet owes much to the inherited acquirement of his spiritual ancestors. These ancestors form his tradition, are the classic examples on which his education is based; and from them he takes the language which they have sought out and constructed as a means of telling their adventures to the world.<sup>144</sup>

This understanding of tradition much resembles Eliot's vision of literary tradition put forward a few years later in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919). His engagement with Underhill, thus, could be seen as the beginning of his long-lasting preoccupation with the idea of tradition, understood both in a literary and spiritual sense, and with the dogma

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<sup>142</sup> Underhill, p. 95.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., p. 452.

of the Incarnation, which becomes crucial to his theological thinking long before he enters the Church of England.<sup>145</sup>

In 1917, in one of his early reviews, Eliot tries to define the difference between philosophy and religion. He points out that ‘philosophy depends upon the whole course of history’, whereas Christian religion ‘depends upon one important fact’, which is the Incarnation. Eliot argues that ‘it seems therefore insufficient to claim [...] that Jesus was an historical person’.<sup>146</sup> While history and philosophy can account only for Jesus’s human existence, it is theology which by means of the dogma, ‘a proposition that is either true or false, its terms having a fixed meaning’, can account for Jesus’s divine nature.<sup>147</sup> To Eliot, dogma appears to be a statement whose value can be determined in absolute terms as either true or false, and even if there is no scientific criterion that could be employed to verify it, to Christians who endorse it, it ought to have ‘a fixed meaning’. However, as Modernist theology began gaining increasing support within the Church of England in the 1910s–1920s, with the influential *Modern Churchman* publishing the most recent works by Anglican Modernists, it was becoming clear that the Incarnation was considered one of the doctrines which lacked the ‘fixed meaning’ that Eliot wished to ascribe to it.

In 1921 the theme of the Churchmen’s Union’s annual conference held at Girton College, Cambridge, was announced to be ‘Christ and the Creeds’, as Modernist

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<sup>145</sup> Underhill remained an important author for Eliot. In 1927, he asked William Force Stead to review her *Man and the Supernatural* (together with *Studies in the Psychology of the Mystics* by Joseph Marechal, and *Western Mysticism* by Dom Cuthbert Butler) for the *Criterion*. Eliot also invited Underhill to contribute to the *Criterion*. In 1933, she wrote a review of *Elements of the Spiritual Life* by F. P. Harton. She also reviewed Eliot’s *The Idea of a Christian Society* for *Time and Tide* in 1939. In an unpublished memorial piece on Underhill, Eliot wrote that ‘her studies of the great mystics laid the inspiration not primarily of the scholar or champion of forgotten genius, but of a consciousness of the grievous need of the contemplative element in the modern world’. See Eliot, ‘Letter to William Force Stead, 6 October 1927’, in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, III, pp. 742–743; Underhill, ‘Review of *Elements of the Spiritual Life: A Study of Ascetical Theology* by F. P. Harton’, *The Criterion*, 12.47 (January 1933), 282–284; Underhill, ‘Poets-Prophets: Review of *The Idea of Christian Society* by T. S. Eliot, and *The Descent of the Dove: A Short History of the Holy Spirit in the Church* by Charles Williams’, *Tide and Time*, 4 November 1939, pp. 1416–1417. Eliot’s unpublished memorial piece is quoted in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, III, note 3 on page 742.

<sup>146</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘Review of *Religion and Philosophy* by R. G. Collingwood’, *International Journal of Ethics*, 27.4 (1917), 543.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

theologians associated in the Union saw the need to rethink the meaning of the Incarnation in the light of historical research and developments in the field of psychology. The majority of papers presented tackled the question of how to re-conceptualise the union of the human and the divine that took place in the act of the Incarnation.<sup>148</sup> The organisers of the conference acknowledged that it would be ‘idle to pretend that all the views expressed at Girton are in harmony with popular orthodoxy, or even with traditional orthodoxy’, yet they professed that:

There is an orthodoxy which by becoming stagnant can become heresy, just as there is a religious devotion which, by refusing to become intelligent and moral, can become superstition. The Girton Conference speakers were more concerned to adjust their orthodoxy to the orthodoxy of the future, than to harmonize it with the orthodoxy of the past.<sup>149</sup>

The majority of conference participants seemed to agree that the doctrine of the Incarnation leaves the question of the relationship of Jesus to God open, and that ‘modern views of God and modern conceptions of personality may lead us more fully to understand the divine nature of Jesus and His spiritual supremacy’.<sup>150</sup> It was emphasised that the Incarnation is an expression of the understanding of Jesus’s humanity and divinity held by early Christians, and that the obligation of a modern believer is to probe into the historically contingent layers of the doctrine in order to arrive at the core of its meaning. It was agreed that, as J. F. Bethune-Baker, a leading Modernist and professor of Divinity at Cambridge, stated some years earlier, ‘[i]t is conceivable that Christians of a future age

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<sup>148</sup> The papers presented at the conference were published in the *Modern Churchman*, 11.5/6 (September 1921). This included essays ‘The Centrality of the Person and Work of Jesus’ by E. W. Barnes (pp. 253–269), ‘Christ as Logos and Son of God’ by H. Rashdall (pp. 278–286), ‘Jesus as both Human and Divine’ by J. F. Bethune-Baker (pp. 287–301), and ‘Jesus, the Son of God’ by H. D. A. Major (pp. 270–278).

<sup>149</sup> Henry D. A. Major, ‘The Modern Churchmen’s Conference of 1921’, *Modern Churchman*, 11.5/6 (September 1921), 193–200 (p. 193).

<sup>150</sup> E. W. Barnes, ‘The Present Situation’, *Modern Churchman*, 11.5/6 (September 1921), 343–348 (p. 347).

may yet find some other category that will express more exactly for them, in closer correspondence with their knowledge of the universe and of life, what their early forefathers meant by the Incarnation.’<sup>151</sup>

The issues discussed at the conference were brought to the attention of the general public through extensive coverage in numerous newspapers, which – depending on the newspaper’s stance in the Modernism–neo-scholasticism debate – was either supportive or dismissive. The *Times Literary Supplement* reported that the conference was a successful ‘attempt to indicate the mode in which the educated Christian of to-day may most clearly state what his belief in the Incarnation implies,’ and that the speakers ‘were animated by a true religious spirit and were anxious to secure a reverent yet free consideration of one of the basal elements of Christianity, not to excite doubt but to re-establish faith’.<sup>152</sup> At the same time, the Roman Catholic *Tablet* announced that:

Our very separated Brethren, the Anglicans, have been holding a feast of infidelity at Cambridge. [...] You can put a charge of dynamite at the foundations and blow down a tower, but you can’t blow down a tower that has already been blown down. Anglicanism isn’t a building, it is a heap of doctrinal ruins.<sup>153</sup>

The negative coverage proved to be serious enough to bring the charge of heresy against Henry D. A. Major, the editor of the *Modern Churchman*, and lead to the appointment of the first Doctrine Commission in the Church of England in 1922. In the same year, Major published the pamphlet *A Resurrection of Relics: A Modern Churchman’s Defence in a Recent Charge of Heresy* in which he dismissed the charges levelled against him, and expounded on what he believed ought to be the attitude of modern Christians toward the Church doctrines:

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<sup>151</sup> James F. Bethune-Baker, *The Faith of the Apostles’ Creed: An Essay in Adjustment of Belief and Faith* (London: Macmillan, 1918), pp. ix–x.

<sup>152</sup> Samuel Knight, ‘Christ and the Creeds’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 22 September 1921, p. 606.

<sup>153</sup> ‘The Limit’, *The Tablet*, 20 August 1921, p. 15.

The doctrine of the Incarnation, the doctrine of Christ's Resurrection and Ascension, the doctrine of Eternal Judgment and the Second Advent, are all doctrines where the Church of England today will do well to make the clearest distinction possible between the *fact* and the *mode*, and to say in unmistakable and emphatic tones to her clergy and laity: The moral and spiritual realities to which these doctrines witness are of supreme and eternal value to Mankind: the forms which they assume in men's minds in particular ages are temporary and mutable. You ought as Christians to believe in the Incarnation of God in Christ, but whether by a Virgin Birth or by some other means is not essential to your Christian faith; you ought as Christians to believe that Christ triumphed over death and is now at the right hand of God, but whether by a physical resurrection and ascension or by a spiritual one is not essential to your Christian faith.<sup>154</sup>

The charge of heresy that Major faced was eventually dismissed by the Bishop of Oxford, yet heated debates continued. The key notions discussed in them – the role of religion in contemporary world, the authority of tradition, and the question of the inner conscience – were soon to become part of the famous debate between Eliot and John Middleton Murry. Both Murry and Eliot read the *Modern Churchman*, and the disputes taking place on its pages offered them a set of questions they kept exploring in the following years both in the essays written as part of their own debate, and in their later independent works, with Murry putting forward his views in *The Life of Jesus* (1926), and Eliot responding poetically in the early Ariel poems (1927–1930).<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Henry D. A. Major, *A Resurrection of Relics: A Modern Churchman's Defence in a Recent Charge of Heresy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1922), p. xii.

<sup>155</sup> In 'Thoughts after Lambeth', Eliot admits that he is sometimes 'moved to admire an article in *The Modern Churchman*'. T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), pp. 363–387 (pp. 386–387). That Murry was a reader of the magazine is confirmed by Goldie, p. 147.

The polemic between Eliot and Murry, which came to be known primarily as the Romanticism–Classicism debate, began in 1923 with Murry’s essay ‘On Fear; and on Romanticism’. It was written as a response to a remark by Raymond Mortimer, the *New Statesman*’s literary editor, who suggested that Murry’s journal, the *Adelphi*, was ‘the last stand’ of Romanticism. In his essay, Murry argued forcefully that ‘[i]n England there never has been any classicism worth talking about: we have had classics, but no classicism’.<sup>156</sup> He argued that if one insists on the use of the terms ‘Classic’ and ‘Romantic’, then all English ‘classics are romantic’.<sup>157</sup> Eliot accepted the challenge and responded with ‘The Function of Criticism’, published in the *Criterion* in the following month. While Goldie in his invaluable study of the Eliot–Murry polemic has observed that the debate ‘would quickly move on to a dispute about the religious content that was becoming manifest in the work of both men’, I suggest that the question of religion was at its heart from the very beginning.<sup>158</sup> The critical discussions of the debate tend to overlook the fact that in the text considered to be its starting point, Murry asserts in an unequivocal way: ‘I do not think the opposed forces are Romantic and Classic’.<sup>159</sup> Eliot, in a letter written a year later, similarly admits: ‘I am not among those who believe in an absolute distinction between Classicism and Romanticism’.<sup>160</sup> However, even though both sides of the debate distanced themselves from the terms that they thought did not touch upon the crux of the problem they were discussing, the words ‘Classicism’ and ‘Romanticism’ kept

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<sup>156</sup> John Middleton Murry, ‘On Fear; and on Romanticism’, *The Adelphi*, 1.4 (September 1923), 269–277 (p. 274), (repr. as ‘On Editing; and on Romanticism’, in John Middleton Murry, *To the Unknown God: Essays towards a Religion* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1924), pp. 74–85).

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 274.

<sup>158</sup> Goldie, p. 132.

<sup>159</sup> Murry, ‘On Fear; and on Romanticism’, p. 273.

<sup>160</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘Letter to Henri Bremond, 14 May 1924’, in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, II: 1923–1925, ed. by Valerie Eliot and Hugh Haughton (2009), pp. 417–418.

reappearing in their essays, being constantly defined and redefined. Murry's and Eliot's initial unease about the appropriateness of the terms led to their subsequent dismissal as, in Murry's words, 'Protean and unsatisfactory words' that, according to Eliot, 'inflame political passions, and tend to prejudice our conclusions'.<sup>161</sup> My discussion of the debate, therefore, moves away from the Romanticism–Classicism issue to focus on the question of the interpretation of religious experience, which, I suggest, is at the core of the Eliot–Murry polemic.<sup>162</sup>

In 1923, the question of 'the inner voice' and external authority became one of the key issues of the debate. In 'On Fear; and on Romanticism', Murry argued that 'individualism' was inherent in the English tradition, claiming that 'the man who truly interrogates himself will ultimately hear the voice of God; in terms of literary criticism, the writer achieves impersonality through personality'.<sup>163</sup> Murry introduced the notion of 'the inner voice' to counter Eliot's emphasis on the necessity of self-surrender put forward in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', which Murry identified with the spirit of Catholicism. Murry argued that 'Catholicism stands for the principle of unquestioned spiritual authority outside the individual; that is also the principle of classicism in literature'.<sup>164</sup> Murry did not believe that one's inner experience could be interpreted according to a set of external standards and that anyone could make claims to spiritual authority over an individual conscience. He argued that in the contemporary world the

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<sup>161</sup> John Middleton Murry, 'Towards a Synthesis', *The Criterion*, 5.3 (June 1927), 294–313 (p. 300); T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England* (London: Faber, 1933), p. 129.

<sup>162</sup> For a detailed account of the Romanticism–Classicism interpretation of the debate, see Goldie, *A Critical Difference*, esp. chapter 2: 'The *Criterion* versus the *Adelphi*, 1922–1925', pp. 61–127; and Jason Harding, *The Criterion: Cultural Politics and Periodical Networks in Inter-War Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), esp. chapter 1: 'The *Adelphi*: Reaction Against Romanticism', pp. 25–43. Other accounts of the debate can be found in L. R. Sharma, *The T. S. Eliot–Middleton Murry Debate: The Shaping of Literary Theory* (Allahabad: Silver Birch, 1994); Sharron Greer Cassavant, *John Middleton Murry: The Critic as Moralist* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1982); and Ernest George Griffin, *John Middleton Murry* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1969), chapter 2: 'Murry, Eliot, and Style', pp. 40–57.

<sup>163</sup> Murry, 'On Fear; and on Romanticism', p. 275.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 276.

Church had lost its spiritual authority. In ‘Christ and Christianity’ (1925), Murry states that ‘the finer conscience of mankind has now passed definitely outside the Church. [...] the Church has done its work: it is no longer adequate to the religious consciousness of modern times’.<sup>165</sup> He argues that the only way for theology to ‘rehabilitate itself is for it to become truly modern’, sympathising with Anglican Modernists’ attempts to rethink Christian creeds.<sup>166</sup> According to Murry, the Church’s resistance to the idea that dogmas and doctrines may undergo evolution is yet another proof that the Church is incapable of maintaining its spiritual authority in modernity. Hence, at present, Murry argues, a Christian who is honest in his or her faith ought to realise that he or she does not need to comply with the dogmatic aspect of Christianity, as was the case in previous centuries. Since the Church failed to respond to the religious consciousness of humankind, ‘the man who believes in God does not need a Church’ any more, and should learn to imitate Jesus’s heroic individualism.<sup>167</sup>

Eliot’s reply targets Murry’s emphasis on the value of ‘the inner voice’. In ‘The Function of Criticism’ (1923), Eliot reaffirms the views he expressed in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, arguing that there is ‘something outside the artist to which he owes allegiance, a devotion to which he must surrender and sacrifice himself in order to earn and to obtain his unique position’.<sup>168</sup> Eliot rejects Murry’s notion of ‘the inner voice’ and points out that it may easily lead to a self-focused attitude, which precludes the possibility of any transcendental encounter.<sup>169</sup> Responding to Murry’s proposition that one should

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<sup>165</sup> John Middleton Murry, ‘Christ and Christianity’, *The Adelphi*, 3.4 (September 1925), 233–241 (pp. 233–234).

<sup>166</sup> John Middleton Murry, ‘A Theological Encounter’, *The Adelphi*, 3.3 (July 1925), 77–88 (p. 84).

<sup>167</sup> John Middleton Murry, ‘Religion and Christianity’, *The Adelphi*, 1.8 (January 1924), 666–674 (p. 670), (repr. in *To the Unknown God*, pp. 193–203).

<sup>168</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘The Function of Criticism’, *The Criterion*, 2.5 (October 1923), 31–42 (p. 32), (repr. in *Selected Essays*, pp. 23–34).

<sup>169</sup> Several years later Eliot would reiterate his views, arguing against Irving Babbitt’s notion of ‘the inner check’. Eliot stated that the way Babbitt formulated his concept suggests that ‘there is nothing left for the individual to check himself by but his own private notions and his judgment, which is pretty precarious’. ‘The Humanism of Irving Babbitt’, *The Forum*, 80.1 (July 1928), 37–44 (p. 41), (repr. in *Selected Essays*, pp. 471–480); see also Eliot, ‘Francis Herbert Bradley’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 29 December 1927, pp. 981–982, (repr. in *Selected Essays*, pp. 444–455).

focus more on listening to one's 'inner voice' rather than any external authority, Eliot, perhaps referring to Saint Narcissus from his poem, writes:

It is an exercise, however, which I believe was of enough interest to Catholicism for several handbooks to be written on its practice. But the Catholic practitioners were, I believe, with the exception of certain heretics, not palpitating Narcissi; the Catholic did not believe that God and himself were identical. 'The man who truly interrogates himself will ultimately hear the voice of God', Mr. Murry says. In theory, this leads to a form of pantheism.<sup>170</sup>

Eliot's argument echoes very closely the warning against pantheism that Pius X expressed in the *Pascendi* encyclical, as well as Underhill's discussion of true and false mysticism, in which she characterised the latter as a tendency to identify oneself with the deity.<sup>171</sup> Following Underhill's argument, Eliot asserts that dogmas provide a hermeneutic framework for the interpretation of the individual's religious experience, and it is in the act of interpretation that such an experience is validated and elucidated. The meaning of a religious experience, Eliot and Underhill suggest, is confirmed by the way in which it enters into relations with other mystics' experiences that form part of the order of tradition, which also includes inherited doctrines and dogmas, the Incarnation being the most crucial among them.<sup>172</sup>

Murry could not agree with this and in *The Life of Jesus* developed his own interpretation of the Incarnation, putting emphasis on the radical individualism of Jesus. Referring to works of Modernist theologians such as William Inge, Dean of St Paul's Cathedral, Ernest William Barnes, Bishop of Birmingham, and Canon Burnett Hillman

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<sup>170</sup> Eliot, 'The Function of Criticism', pp. 35–36.

<sup>171</sup> In *Mysticism*, Underhill argued that '[u]nless safeguarded by limiting dogmas, the theory of Immanence, taken alone, is notoriously apt to degenerate into pantheism; and into those extravagant perversions of the doctrine of "deification" in which the mystic holds his transfigured self to be identical with the Indwelling God' (p. 119).

<sup>172</sup> In 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', Eliot makes a similar point with regard to art and poetry, stating that 'no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. [...] You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead'. *Selected Essays*, pp. 13–22 (p. 15), (first publ. in *The Egoist*, 6.4 and 6.5 (1919), 54–55; 72–73).

Streeter (who was to become Eliot's godfather the following year), Murry weaves historical research into his narrative of Jesus, a man and a sinner, who with his baptism starts believing that he is the Son of God. In Murry's story Jesus, born as a human, gradually becomes the Son of God by nourishing a deep belief in God the Father. The divinity of Jesus, Murry claims, consists in the fact that he died out of love for men, to convince them that God was their loving Father, even though he did not know if God existed. Murry reiterates his earlier argument that Jesus 'had created the living God for whom he died [and] by dying for him, he did indeed create him, a loving God who was a man, as a loving God must be'.<sup>173</sup> Thus, Murry carries out a radical rewriting of what Eliot considers the central dogma of Christian tradition, arguing that the Incarnation did not happen once in history, but that it is a process which followers of Jesus can re-enact in their own lives by imitating Jesus and finding 'the spark of that divine something' within their own selves.<sup>174</sup> An organised religion, Murry warns his readers, will always try to eliminate such personal revelations. In an institutionalised context, 'new revelation cannot be suffered, for it strikes direct at the heart of authority. It is, and must be condemned as subversive and heretical'.<sup>175</sup> According to him, the spiritual dynamism that faithfulness to Jesus implies cannot be contained in institutionalised religion as in the formal Church setting it 'becomes petrified into dogmas and ceremonies' and soon turns into 'Church-mummery'.<sup>176</sup>

For Eliot, who has just started making arrangements for his baptism and confirmation into the Church of England, Murry's book must have indeed seemed heretical, embodying most of the difficulties he identified in Modernist theology: the excessive focus on the individual self, leanings towards the interpretation of the divine as the Bergsonian *élan vital*, and the perception of the development of Christian tradition as

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<sup>173</sup> Murry, 'Christ and Christianity', pp. 239–240.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> John Middleton Murry, *The Life of Jesus* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1926), pp. 53–54.

<sup>176</sup> Murry, 'Romanticism and the Tradition', p. 273.

an evolutionary process. At the same time, however, Eliot acknowledged the theological validity of Murry's book. Before he published its review in the *Criterion*, he warned Murry: 'You may not be pleased, but you know I take theology seriously, as you do.'<sup>177</sup> Before the review went to print, in several private letters Eliot questioned Murry about the problem of finding a mode of interpretation of individual religious experience. 'I cannot perceive', he wrote, 'that *you* admit any objective restraint upon translating any feeling into a belief, & I think this can only lead to non-conformist individual chaos.'<sup>178</sup> To this Murry replied:

when you ask me for a theology, my reply is that the men of religious experience (of whom Jesus is to me the highest example) didn't have, or want one. They knew, what I too know, having learned it from them, that theologies are unnecessary to misleading.<sup>179</sup>

Eliot wrote back asking: 'if one has no theology, should not one try to get one? They *are* misleading, but to have *no* theology is to be still worse misled'.<sup>180</sup> While Eliot acknowledges the problems inherent in theology and its abstract speculations, he regards the other extreme – which he considers to be Murry's refusal to speculate according to terms defined by theology – even more dangerous. In one of his philosophy essays written at Harvard, Eliot remarked: 'To reduce the world to a set of formulae is to let it slip through our fingers in a fine dust; but to fly into an emotional orgy or retire into a sunlit stupor is to let the world slip through our fingers in a thin smoke'.<sup>181</sup> While Eliot considered his philosophical studies to fall into the first category, turning reality known in ordinary

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<sup>177</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Letter to John Middleton Murry, 1 February 1927', in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, III, pp. 397–398 (p. 398). Eliot asked William Force Stead for advice on and assistance in entering the Church of England in a letter sent on [3] February 1927 (*The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, III, pp. 403–404).

<sup>178</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Letter to John Middleton Murry, 8 February 1927', in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, III, pp. 415–416 (p. 416).

<sup>179</sup> John Middleton Murry, 'Letter to T. S. Eliot, 18 March 1927', in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, III, pp. 450–452 (p. 452).

<sup>180</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Letter to John Middleton Murry, 28 March 1927', in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, III, pp. 458–459 (p. 459).

<sup>181</sup> Eliot, [Ethics], MS Am 1691.14 (32), p. 2.

experience into a ‘fine dust’, the reinterpretation of religion that Murry advocated appeared to him to be too much of an ‘emotional orgy’.

In his review published in the *Criterion*, Eliot acknowledged the ‘evidence of hard labour’ and theological research that Murry undertook, yet severely criticised his ‘tergiversation of metaphor’ that led to the identification of the human with the divine and to claims that Jesus taught ‘no less than that man must *be* God’.<sup>182</sup> In Murry’s reasoning Eliot discovers affinities with both Modernist theology and ‘Jesuit Catholicism of the seventeenth century’.<sup>183</sup> In the Clark Lectures of 1926, he describes the latter as a tendency of religion to abandon ‘the pursuit of metaphysical truth’, which he associated with Dominican scholasticism, and develop ‘in the direction of psychology’.<sup>184</sup> Against the Spanish psychological mysticism, which he deems ‘a spiritual haschisch, a drugging of the emotions’, he sets the ontological ‘Artistotelian-Victorine-Dantesque’ mysticism, which he considers ‘an intellectual preparation for spiritual contemplation’.<sup>185</sup> The main objection he voices against the former is that it substitutes ‘the divine passion by the human’, in a way similar to Murry’s narrative of Jesus’s life, whereas the latter, present in the poetry of Dante and his contemporaries, was able ‘to enlarge the boundary of human love so as to make it a stage in a progress toward the divine.’<sup>186</sup> Whether Eliot considered his theory of the two types of mysticism a satisfactory refutation of Murry’s vision of the

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<sup>182</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘Recent Books’, *The Criterion*, 5.3 (May 1927), 253–259 (p. 256).

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 258.

<sup>184</sup> Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry: The Clark Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, 1926, and the Turnbull Lectures at The Johns Hopkins University, 1933*, ed. by Ronald Schuchard (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), pp. 77–78. Even though Eliot claimed to speak from the position of ‘a detached literary critic’, his ambivalent attitude to psychologically-inclined theological speculations comes to the surface in his descriptions of Spanish mystics. ‘It is possible’, he argues, ‘that the experience of St. Theresa and her fellow mystics in Spain would in an earlier and less dangerous period have been subjected to closer scrutiny, and been less quickly accepted by the Church’ (p. 78). Furthermore, in a letter to Francis Yealy, who attended Eliot’s Clark lectures and questioned his interpretation of Ignatian mysticism, Eliot wrote: ‘Until you persuade me to the contrary I remain in sympathy with the Dominican tradition in contrast to the Jesuit tradition’. ‘Letter to Francis Yealy, 16 March 1926’, in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, III, pp. 103–104 (p. 104).

<sup>185</sup> Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, pp. 104–105. See also Ronald Schuchard’s discussion of Eliot’s changing attitude to Ignatius as a mystic in ‘Eliot and Ignatius: Discovery and Abandonment in Donne’, *Modern Schoolman*, 73.1 (1995), 1–16 (repr. in *Eliot’s Dark Angel*, chapter 9: ‘The Ignatian Interlude’, pp. 162–174).

<sup>186</sup> Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, pp. 166–167.

Incarnation is difficult to say, yet the fact that he compared Murry to Spanish mystics, such as Teresa of Ávila or John of the Cross, and a few months later called him ‘the genuine Heretic – a very rare bird’, suggests that Eliot did acknowledge the seriousness of the theological problems that Murry’s work posed.<sup>187</sup>

Despite Eliot’s hostile review, Murry’s book was warmly received by a general reading public, especially in the circles open to Modernist theology, which was becoming the mainstream theology of the Church of England.<sup>188</sup> Goldie points out that in recognition of his book’s value, Murry was appointed a reviewer of subsequent narratives of Jesus’s life for the *Times Literary Supplement*.<sup>189</sup> More importantly, Murry’s views became validated by the Modernist theologians who quoted them with approval in their own works, with Dean Inge remarking that Murry’s work can be seen as ‘a sort of *Ecce Homo* for our generation’.<sup>190</sup> Eliot’s debate with Murry was no longer confined to the pages of the *Criterion* and the *Adelphi*, as now Eliot would encounter Murry’s views repeated by the members of the Anglican community of which he has just become a member. It is not surprising then that he was not impressed with the works of Hugh R. L. Sheppard and Maude Royden, which he casually mentions reading in 1930.<sup>191</sup> The former refers to Murry’s argument that Jesus is ‘the most real Man Who ever lived’, while the latter quotes Murry’s statement that Jesus became God’s son because he ‘claimed [it] for himself’.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘Review of *Why I Am Not a Christian* by Bertrand Russell’, *The Criterion*, 6.2 (August 1927), 177–179 (p. 179).

<sup>188</sup> From the late 1910s, the Anglo-Catholic party was losing ground to Modernists, who were winning widespread support. In 1921, R. A. Wynter in his paper ‘The Future of Anglicanism’ wrote: ‘Modernism, and the spirit of modernism, is rapidly capturing the Church of England. It has caught the hitherto arid and unaffected imagination of those large tracts of indeterminate churchmanship which the Catholic party has never been able to touch. [...] The tide is flowing steadily in one direction, and the Catholic party, unable to stem it, is learning that discretion is the better part of valour, and is beginning to swim with it. The Catholic party is no longer driving but being driven; no longer heading but being led.’ R. A. Wynter, ‘The Future of Anglicanism’, *Dublin Review*, 168 (April, May, June 1921), 261–282 (p. 273).

<sup>189</sup> Goldie, p. 152.

<sup>190</sup> Quoted in Goldie, p. 152.

<sup>191</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘Religion without Humanism’, p. 108.

<sup>192</sup> Hugh R. L. Sheppard, *The Impatience of a Parson: A Plea for the Recovery of Vital Christianity* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1927), p. 65; A. Maude Royden, *I Believe in God* (London: Benn, 1927), p. 109.

Eliot too, despite the fact that he did not agree with Murry on many issues, implicitly acknowledged the value of his work. In one of his letters to Murry, he wrote: ‘I know that in many ways – spiritually, you are much wiser than I,’<sup>193</sup> and a few years after he called Murry ‘the genuine Heretic’, he admitted:

the essential of any important heresy is not simply that it is wrong: it is that it is partly right. It is characteristic of the more interesting heretics, in the context in which I use the term, that they have an exceptionally acute perception, or profound insight, of some part of the truth; an insight more important often than the inferences of those who are aware of more but less acutely aware of anything. So far as we are able to redress the balance, effect the compensation, ourselves, we may find such authors of the greatest value.<sup>194</sup>

Following up on this, I suggest that the early Ariel poems could be read as Eliot’s attempt to ‘redress the balance’ of the key notions recurrent in the theological debates of the period, and his own rethinking of the Incarnation, prompted by the works of Murry and Modernist theologians. The first poem of the cycle, ‘Journey of the Magi’, can well be read as a poetic response to Murry’s claim that ‘[t]he birth in the manger at Bethlehem, the Star in the East, the visit of the Wise Men, are devoid of historical reality. These wonderful things did not happen’.<sup>195</sup> The poem challenges Murry’s statement and presents the Magi’s journey as a re-enactment of the modern believer’s search for the meaning of the Incarnation – a ‘long [hermeneutic] journey’ to understand ‘this Birth’.

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<sup>193</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘Letter to John Middleton Murry, 12 April 1925’, in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, II, pp. 628–629 (p. 628).

<sup>194</sup> T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), pp. 24–25.

<sup>195</sup> Murry, *The Life of Jesus*, p. 14.

*'Journey of the Magi'*

While Murry denied the value of Christian dogmas on the premise that they comprise a fossilised set of religious ideas that have lost their meaning in modernity, and in *The Life of Jesus* carried out a radical reinterpretation of the Incarnation, Eliot in his 'Journey of the Magi' challenged Murry's interpretation, taking Lancelot Andrewes – for whom, Eliot believed, the Incarnation was 'an essential dogma' – as his guide once again.<sup>196</sup> In his essay on Andrewes, Eliot places particular emphasis on his hermeneutical method. Eliot contrasts 'the vague jargon' of contemporary times, when people seem to have 'a vocabulary for everything and exact ideas about nothing – when a word half-understood, torn from its place in some alien or half-formed science, as of psychology, conceals from both writer and reader the utter meaninglessness of a statement' with Andrewes's impressive ability to engage with a written word and patiently inquire into its possible meanings.<sup>197</sup> Andrewes, Eliot argues, 'takes a word and derives the world from it; squeezing and squeezing the word until it yields a full juice of meaning which we should never have supposed any word to possess'.<sup>198</sup> This interpretative method of Andrewes is easily discernible in his Nativity Sermon of 1622, from which Eliot quotes in the opening of 'Journey of the Magi'. The journey taking place in the poem could be read as multiple journeys happening simultaneously: the historical journey of the Wise Men from the East to Bethlehem, the journey of a convert who through baptism embraces death and is born into new life, and the journey of a modern Magus who attempts to comprehend the ancient

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<sup>196</sup> 'Lancelot Andrewes' was originally published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 September 1926, pp. 621–622. All quotations are from 'Lancelot Andrewes,' in *Selected Essays*, pp. 341–353. 'Journey of the Magi,' in *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber, 2004), pp. 103–104. All subsequent quotations are from this edition. In a letter to the *Times Literary Supplement* editor, Bruce Richmond, of 6 July 1926, Eliot acknowledged that the article on Lancelot Andrewes was 'a pretty serious matter' for him. He explained: 'I shall have to clear up my mind and try to come to conclusions, in connection with Bishop Andrewes, affecting my whole position'. *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, III, pp. 209–210 (p. 209). I am grateful to Ronald Schuchard for bringing this letter to my attention.

<sup>197</sup> Eliot, 'Lancelot Andrewes', p. 347.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 347–348.

dogma even though his contemporaries consider it a ‘folly’. In what follows, I focus my discussion on this last journey, which could be read as Eliot’s poetic response to the exchange he had with Murry. It is a response in which Eliot probes into the hardships that a modern Magus faces on his hermeneutic journey to understand the dogma of the Incarnation – a journey that is an attempt to make the word (which is also the Word) yield ‘a full juice of meaning’ from which a new world can be derived.

In his Nativity Sermon of 1622, Andrewes analyses a passage from Matthew 2.1–2 relating the arrival of the Wise Men in Jerusalem.<sup>199</sup> He draws attention to the two stages of the Magi’s journey: the first one he refers to as ‘*vidimus stellam*’, the second one – ‘*venimus adorare*’. According to Andrewes, there is a large and difficult gap to bridge between the act of seeing the sign that announces Jesus’s birth – *vidimus*, and acting upon it – *venimus*. In fact, that gap may be so terrible that it incapacitates the one who sees the sign and sends him into a stupor, which could be the reason for Gerontion’s refusal to take any action. The Magus in Eliot’s poem has already bridged this gap. He has accepted the fact that to understand *Christus natus*, who is also *Christus signatus*, one needs be ready to actively seek; as Andrewes argues, ‘there is no promise [...] of finding but to such as “seek”’.<sup>200</sup> The seeking does not consist in the passive ‘waiting for rain’, but rather in setting out on a journey on which one is stripped of almost everything that until now has comprised one’s comfort zone: ‘The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces, | And the silken girls bringing sherbet’ (9–10). One lets go of one’s ambitions and dreams, and struggles against displacement and doubt.

The lines with which the Magus opens his reminiscences refer back to Andrewes’s vision of the journey of the Magi:

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<sup>199</sup> Lancelot Andrewes, ‘Sermon XV’, in *Seventeen Sermons on the Nativity*, pp. 245–259. The passage, quoted in Andrewes, reads: ‘Behold there came three wise men from the East to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is the King of the Jews That is born? For we have seen His star in the East, and are come to worship Him’ (p. 245).

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 255.

‘A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey, and such a long journey:  
The ways deep and the weather sharp,  
The very dead of winter.’ (1–5)

The biblical journey, Andrewes asserts, was taken under the most adverse conditions; it was ‘troublesome, dangerous, unseasonable’, yet the Magi did complete it.<sup>201</sup> What made it possible for them to find *Christus natus* was the ‘light of the star in their eyes, the “word of prophecy” in their ears, the beam of His Spirit in their hearts’.<sup>202</sup> In Eliot’s account of the journey, however, there is no star to guide the Magi. In their ears, instead of the ‘word of prophecy’, there are ‘the voices singing [...], saying | That this was all folly’ (19–20), which could well be read as an ironic reference to Murry’s ‘inner voice’. The experience of the modern Magus appears to be even more ‘unseasonable’ than the biblical journey – he seems to be left without any guidance.

There is a counsel, however, to be found in the conclusion of Andrewes’s sermon. He addresses his contemporaries in the following words: ‘We cannot say *vidimus stellam*; the star is gone long since, not now to be seen. [...] It is enough we read of it in the text; we see it there’.<sup>203</sup> Thus, he adds one more stage to the modern believer’s journey of faith; before we can arrive at *vidimus stellam* – seeing the sign, and *venimus adorare* – embarking on a journey to worship God, there is an initial stage of *legimus* – reading the Scripture. For the modern believer, hence, *Christus natus* becomes *Christus signatus* in yet a new way. He is not only a sign that needs to be found, but also a hermeneutic task to be performed – a textual and historical sign that needs to be, first, found, and second, interpreted.

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid., p. 253.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., p. 252.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., p. 259.

The question of hermeneutics is one of the central themes of the second stanza. When the Magi reach their destination, they find themselves in a landscape whose concentrated symbolic imagery begs for interpretation:

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,  
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;  
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,  
And three trees on the low sky,  
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.  
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,  
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,  
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.  
But there was no information, and so we continued  
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon  
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory. (21–31)

As Michael P. Dean suggests, these lines and their condensed imagery can be said to contain almost the entire Gospel narrative.<sup>204</sup> The opening image of the Magi seeing a ‘wet’, ‘temperate valley’, ‘smelling of vegetation’ evokes the notion of rebirth and new beginning. The ‘running stream’ and the ‘water-mill’ bring to mind the image of God as ‘the fountain of living waters’ (Jeremiah 2.13), and ‘the wells of salvation’ (Isaiah 12.3),<sup>205</sup> as well as the rain for which Gerontion waited in vain. The symbolism of water merges with the light and darkness imagery: the Magi enter the valley at dawn, and soon will see the sun rising; the water-mill is ‘beating the darkness’. Again, reference is made to one of the traditional biblical images symbolising Christ: ‘the light of the world’ (John 8.12), ‘a light to lighten the Gentiles’ (Luke 2.32). The ‘three trees’ recall the three crosses on

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<sup>204</sup> Michael P. Dean ‘T. S. Eliot’s “Journey of the Magi”: Confrontation with Christianity’, *Xavier Review* 1.1/2 (1980–1981), 75–84 (p. 80).

<sup>205</sup> Further examples of this image can be found, for instance, in John 4.14: ‘But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life’; and Revelation 22.17: ‘And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.’

Golgotha, and the following lines, as Grover Smith points out, include numerous ‘allusions to the Communion (through the tavern “bush”), to the paschal lamb whose blood was smeared on the lintels of Israel, to the blood money of Judas, to the contumely suffered by Christ before the Crucifixion, to the soldiers casting lots at the foot of the Cross, and, perhaps, to the pilgrims at the open tomb in the garden’.<sup>206</sup> Despite such a proliferation of symbolic images, to the Magi it seems that there was ‘no information’ left for them. Without the interpretative key, they are unable to read the signs that surround them. The ironic overtone of their conclusion that ‘no information’ was left for them suggests that the modern Magi have possibly begun attaching too much importance to what can be referred to as ‘information’ – a straightforward and scientifically verifiable fact – and subsequently have lost the ability to read more elusive, symbolic signs, which require a certain degree of tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty.

While Andrewes focuses on the importance of the Magi’s adoration and worship of *Christus natus* (‘That is all in all, and without it all our seeing, coming, seeking, and finding is to no purpose’), the Magus in the poem is silent about what happened in the manger.<sup>207</sup> This is even more striking when one considers Rudolf Germer’s apt observation that among different Nativity stories, the Adoration of the Magi is possibly the most frequently depicted in paintings and Christmas cards and ‘the most cherished, connected by all who are brought up in Christian families with the excitement, wonder and joy of Christmas’.<sup>208</sup> The fact that the modern Magus refuses to reveal any detail related to this experience may reflect his conscious attempt to break away from the over-sentimentalised, superficial understanding of the Incarnation and draw attention to its

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<sup>206</sup> Smith, p. 124.

<sup>207</sup> Andrewes, p. 266.

<sup>208</sup> Rudolf Germer, “‘Journey of the Magi’ in the Context of T. S. Eliot’s Religious Development and Sensibility’ in *T. S. Eliot and Our Turning World*, ed. by Jewel Spears Brooker (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2001), pp. 15–25 (p. 20).

more crucial dimension – he tries to move beyond the ‘wonder and joy of Christmas’, and thus keeps ‘squeezing and squeezing the word’.

The ambivalence of the only term with which the Magus eventually describes the event – ‘satisfactory’ – has puzzled many critics; John H. Timmerman goes as far as to call it ‘an enigma in Eliot criticism’.<sup>209</sup> Some scholars have interpreted it in a theological sense, pointing to the way the word ‘satisfaction’ is used with reference to Christ’s atonement for sin; thus, Dean reads the sentence as a ‘solemn declaration of the sufficiency of Jesus Christ’.<sup>210</sup> This reading would be in line with the *Thirty-Nine Articles* of the Anglican Church that state that: ‘The offering of Christ once made, is that perfect redemption, propitiation, and *satisfaction* for all the sins of the whole world, both original and actual, and there is none other *satisfaction* for sin, but that alone.’<sup>211</sup> It is worth noting that a similar point is made by Lancelot Andrewes in one of his sermons, where he refers to Christ as ‘a complete, full, every way sufficient satisfaction’.<sup>212</sup> Other critics have emphasised the negative overtone of the adjective ‘satisfactory’, considering it an inadequate response to the meaning of the event.<sup>213</sup> In Childs’s interpretation, the word reflects the Magus’s disappointment and his pragmatic attitude to the mystery he has witnessed: ‘the Incarnation is “satisfactory” in the sense of “merely adequate”; it is evaluated as a satisfaction according to whether or not it answers the needs of the inquirer’.<sup>214</sup> Consequently, Childs reads the Magus’s comment as a testimony of his pragmatist attitude to the Incarnation, which did not meet his expectations. This

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<sup>209</sup> John H. Timmerman, *T. S. Eliot’s Ariel Poems: The Poetics of Recovery* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1994), p. 77.

<sup>210</sup> Dean, p. 80. Similar interpretations have been put forward by Rosemary Franklin and R. D. Brown, see Rosemary Franklin, ‘The Satisfactory Journey of Eliot’s Magus’, *English Studies* 49 (1968), 559–561; and R. D. Brown, ‘Revelation in T. S. Eliot’s “Journey of the Magi”’, *Renascence* 24 (1972), 136–140.

<sup>211</sup> ‘The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion’, in *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662*, ed. by Brian Cummings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 674–685 (p. 682, Article 31). Emphasis added.

<sup>212</sup> Lancelot Andrewes, ‘Sermon XI’, in *Seventeen Sermons on the Nativity*, pp. 172–192 (p. 181).

<sup>213</sup> See, for example, Smith, p. 124.

<sup>214</sup> Childs, *T. S. Eliot: Mystic, Son, and Lover*, p. 65.

interpretation, however, does not seem to be corroborated by the last stanza, in which the Magus asserts that he ‘would do it again’, affirming the value of the event and asserting that it made the hard and long journey worthwhile. His affirmation, however, is by no means unambiguous:

All this was a long time ago, I remember,  
And I would do it again, but set down  
This set down  
This: were we led all that way for  
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,  
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,  
But had thought they were different; this Birth was  
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.  
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,  
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,  
With an alien people clutching their gods.  
I should be glad of another death. (32–44)

The Magus reflects on his experience from a certain distance; possibly years have passed since he took his journey. Yet some questions he has not been able to ‘set down’ (a phrase that Lancelot Andrewes frequently employs in his sermons): how to understand the relationship between the Incarnation (‘Birth’) and the Passion (‘Death’), and the radical changes that a comprehension of the meaning of those events inevitably brings into one’s life? The ‘Birth’ was the Magi’s ‘death’ as it made them aware that they would feel alienated from those who did not take the journey and still live ‘in the old dispensation’ that they themselves had to reject. The rejection of certain aspects of their old lives that are now considered sinful – an act necessary, according to Paul, to be able to ‘walk in newness of life’ and live ‘under grace’ (Romans 6.4–14) – can be ‘hard and bitter agony’. All the harder, if one knows that one needs to return to the old ‘places’, where one will meet again people ‘clutching their gods’, reminiscent of the self-enamoured Narcissus

‘writhing in his own clutch’. The problem set out in this stanza shows the biggest difficulty concerning the Magus’s experience to be not the disbelief in what he saw (he has ‘evidence’ and ‘no doubt’), but reconciliation with the way it has changed his life. Instead of the joy present in the Gospels and Nativity stories, there is a feeling of resignation and incomprehension. The meaning arrived at turns out to be profoundly disturbing. While the ancient Magi reacted with joy to the sight of the Birth, the modern Magus’s hermeneutic journey revealed to him that Birth is inextricably bound to Death, yet to comprehend this bond is something that surpasses his understanding.

The final sentence, again, invites different readings. Its ambivalence resides in the phrase ‘another death’, that could be understood either as a ‘different death’ – perhaps one that is less painful and does not require such a big sacrifice – or as ‘another experience of the same type’ that could possibly reveal the full meaning of what has been witnessed in the manger. The former interpretation is supported by the fact that the Magus speaks of his experience as ‘hard and bitter agony’; the latter, by his voluntary declaration: ‘I would do it again’. This ambiguity of the words the Magus utters can be understood as expressive of the ambivalence of his reaction to the event he witnessed, and its impact on his life. Ultimately, Alan Weinblatt observes, the Magus ‘can find no language, no vocabulary, no system of meaning, no frame of reference either logical or theological, in which to set forth his experience’.<sup>215</sup> His lack of theological background, evident in his incomprehension of the symbolic signs he sees in the second stanza, and his scientific mindset tuned to processing ‘information’ and ‘evidence’, but missing subtler signs and hints, make his journey equally or perhaps more difficult than that of the ancient Magi. And yet, through his persistence, he does arrive at his destination, which defies Murry’s assertion that dogmas necessarily petrify the spirit of Christianity. In fact, the modern

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<sup>215</sup> Alan Weinblatt, ‘T. S. Eliot: Poet of Adequation’, in *T. S. Eliot: Essays from the Southern Review*, ed. by James Olney (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 295–316 (p. 312) (first publ. in *Southern Review*, 21.4 (1985), 1118–1137).

Magus's journey shows how the patient 'squeezing and squeezing' of the words of dogma can reveal meanings that 'we should never have supposed any word to possess'. Even if these meanings may give birth to yet more disturbing questions, 'despair', as Eliot points out in his 1931 essay on Blaise Pascal, is 'a necessary prelude to, and element in, the joy of faith'.<sup>216</sup>

### **Between Religious and Aesthetic Experience: Negotiating the Boundary**

The late 1920s bring to the fore yet another dimension of the question of the interpretation of religious experience, namely, its relation to art and, in particular, poetry. As Herbert Read recalls in his memoir, '[t]he problem of poetry and belief was endlessly discussed in these years 1925–30, in conversation and in print'.<sup>217</sup> The debate between Eliot and Murry should thus be viewed within a wider context of a network of exchanges between a number of writers and thinkers, including critic I. A. Richards, literary scholar Mario Praz, philosopher Ramon Fernandez, and theologians Henri Bremond and Jacques Maritain.<sup>218</sup> The focus of this section is the exchange of ideas between Murry and Eliot on the one hand, and Bremond and Maritain on the other. This somewhat unexpected interaction between English writers and critics and French theologians – carried out in letters, essays, and reviews – constitutes a largely neglected area of modernist studies and is hardly ever mentioned in discussions of Eliot's writings.<sup>219</sup> By drawing attention to it, I aim to

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<sup>216</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'The *Pensées* of Pascal', in *Selected Essays*, pp. 402–416 (p. 412).

<sup>217</sup> Herbert Read, 'A Memoir', in *T. S. Eliot: The Man and His Work*, pp. 11–37 (p. 35).

<sup>218</sup> See I. A. Richards, *Science and Poetry* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1926), esp. chapter 6: 'Poetry and Beliefs'; Mario Praz, 'Review of *Prayer and Poetry: A Contribution to Poetical Theory* by Henri Bremond', *The Criterion*, 8.33 (July 1929), 740–745; Ramon Fernandez, *Messages*, trans. by Montgomery Belgion (London: Jonathan Cape, 1927), esp. chapters 6–8.

<sup>219</sup> While Eliot's engagement with Maritain's thought has been addressed by several scholars, hardly any attention has been paid to a wider theological context in which it should be viewed. A notable exception is Leon Surette's treatment of the topic in *The Modern Dilemma: Wallace Stevens, T. S. Eliot, and Humanism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008), chapter 6: 'The Function of Poetry:

demonstrate that the key issues raised by the debate shed light on the development of Eliot's views on the relationship between religion and aesthetics.

The new element brought into the discussion by the French theologians was the relationship (or lack thereof) between mystical experience and poetic inspiration. This question became central to the French debate after Bremond announced in his two books published in 1926 that he considered the two modes of experience inherently related. Maritain, his most influential opponent, demanded, on the other hand, a strict separation between poetic activity and spiritual life. Bremond's and Maritain's arguments further stimulated the polemic between Eliot and Murry, which, I suggest, effectively prompted Eliot to rethink his views on the relation of poetry and religion.

#### *Henri Bremond and the 'Pure Poetry' Debate*

On 6 May 1924, Eliot received a letter from Henri Bremond, who expressed interest in Eliot's debate with Murry, which he learnt about from an advertisement of the *Criterion* published in the *Times Literary Supplement*.<sup>220</sup> Bremond became intrigued by the fact that Eliot's polemic with Murry seemed to touch upon the questions present in the French debate sparked off by the publication of Bremond's book *Pour le Romantisme* (For Romanticism, 1923). He wrote:

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The "Pure Poetry" Debate', pp. 233–272. For discussions of Maritain's influence on Eliot, see Hugh Bredin, 'T. S. Eliot and Thomistic Scholasticism', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 33.2 (1972), 299–306; Shun'ichi Takayanagi, 'T. S. Eliot, Jacques Maritain, and Neo-Thomism', *Modern Schoolman*, 73.1 (1995), 71–90; Jason Harding, "'The Just Impartiality of a Christian Philosopher": Jacques Maritain and T. S. Eliot', in *The Maritain Factor: Taking Religion into Interwar Modernism*, ed. by Rajesh Heynickx and Jan De Maeyer (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2010), pp. 180–191; and James Matthew Wilson, 'Style and Substance: T. S. Eliot, Jacques Maritain, and Neo-Thomism', *Religion & Literature*, 42.3 (2010), 43–73.

<sup>220</sup> 'New Books and Reprints', *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 May 1924, pp. 269–272 (p. 270).

As I intend to re-enter the fray in order to sum up the debate so far, I should be very curious to know what views have been expressed in England. It would, indeed, be very interesting to discover the same literary preoccupation at work on both sides of the water. Can I, without putting you to too much trouble, ask you to send me what has been written on the question in your review?<sup>221</sup>

In his reply to Bremond's letter, Eliot acknowledges that the title of Bremond's book was 'already known' to him, and that he has begun reading it 'with great interest'.<sup>222</sup> With regard to his polemic with Murry, he states:

I shall have great pleasure in sending you the two issues of the *Criterion* which attracted your attention. I fancy that the discussion between Mr Murry and myself is concerned with quite a different area from that of your admirable study. I am not among those who believe in an absolute distinction between Classicism and Romanticism; I even find that, more often than is supposed, one and the same author can be looked at from both angles. What is at issue between Mr Murry and myself is rather that he, in my opinion, confuses literature with religion.<sup>223</sup>

Eliot's assumption that the issue that concerned Bremond was not the relation between literature and religion was incorrect, as this was the precise subject-matter on which Bremond published his next two books, provoking the 'pure poetry' debate.

In 1924, Bremond was already a well-known figure in French intellectual circles, both as a Catholic thinker, ex-Jesuit associated with the Modernist theologians' circles, and a literary scholar.<sup>224</sup> Before he became interested in the relation between literature and religion, he spent considerable time studying the life and work of John Henry Newman.<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> Henri Bremond, 'Letter to T. S. Eliot, 6 May 1924', quoted in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, II, p. 417, n. 2.

<sup>222</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Letter to Henri Bremond, 14 May 1924', *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, II, pp. 417–418.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid. Eliot refers to issues 2.5 (October 1923) and 2.7 (April 1924), in which his 'The Function of Criticism' and Murry's 'Romanticism and the Tradition' were published.

<sup>224</sup> See Henry Hogarth, *Henri Bremond: The Life and Work of a Devout Humanist* (London: SPCK, 1950), and C. J. T. Talar, 'The Historian and the Mystic: The Revisionist Vision of Henri Bremond', *Downside Review*, 440 (2007), 157–196.

<sup>225</sup> For a detailed account of Bremond's work on Newman, see C. J. T. Talar, 'Assenting to Newman: Henri Bremond's *Psychologie de la foi*', *Downside Review*, 121 (2003), 251–270; and Roger Haight, 'Bremond's Newman', *Journal of Theological Studies*, 36.2 (1985), 350–379.

He published his translations of Newman's *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1904) and selected sermons as *Psychologie de la foi* (Psychology of Faith, 1905) and *La vie chrétienne* (The Christian Life, 1906). His study of Newman's work was completed with the biography *Newman: Essai de biographie psychologique* published in 1906, and translated into English in 1907 as *The Mystery of Newman*.<sup>226</sup> Bremond's writing contributed to the revival of interest in Newman's work in France, especially among readers sympathising with the Modernist circles. As C. J. T. Talar points out, the time when Bremond's works on Newman were published was a period when 'Newman's legacy was being strongly contested among neo-scholastic theologians, mediating liberals, and those who would be identified as Modernists'.<sup>227</sup> After Bremond completed his four volumes on Newman, he turned to the study of mysticism. As a theologian, he was well aware that after the publication of the *Pascendi* encyclical, mysticism was becoming exceedingly suspicious within the Roman Catholic Church. He sought to alleviate this situation by writing a history of religious sensibility that traces the development of mystical thought back to the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, which Bremond called the period of 'Devout Humanism' and to which he devoted the first volume of his monumental *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France* (11 volumes, 1916–1936).<sup>228</sup> The subsequent volumes – 'The Mystic Invasion', 'The Mystic Conquest', and 'The Retreat of the Mystics' – are explicitly concerned with proving that mystical tradition was central to the history of the French Church and with presenting

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<sup>226</sup> Henri Bremond, *The Mystery of Newman*, trans. by H. C. Corrance (London: Williams & Norgate, 1907). The aim of Bremond's biographical study was to 'sketch the portrait and describe the inner life of Newman' so as to present his personal experience of faith (p. vii). The introduction to the English translation was written by George Tyrrell.

<sup>227</sup> Talar, 'Assenting to Newman', p. 180. Bremond's *Psychologie de la foi* was considered controversial enough to receive a private Vatican censure in April 1907. As Talar explains, the censure was private so that Newman's reputation would not suffer any damage.

<sup>228</sup> Henri Bremond, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France depuis la fin des guerres de religion jusqu'à nos jours*, 11 vols (Paris: Bloud et Gay, 1916–1936). All quotations are from the English edition: *A Literary History of Religious Thought in France: From the Wars of Religion down to Our Times*, trans. by K. L. Montgomery, 3 vols (London: SPCK, 1928–1936).

mystical experience as part of an ordinary spiritual life.<sup>229</sup> Bremond's project, according to René Wellek, 'uncovered for a new French public the existence of an enormous body of religious literature that had been totally neglected, overshadowed by the reputation and success of French classicism'.<sup>230</sup> As Talar explains, Bremond's attempt to restore the relevance of the past mystical thought was born out of his conviction – formed in the process of the neo-scholastic training he underwent during his Jesuit formation – that 'a more viable alternative was crucial for minds formed by modernity'.<sup>231</sup> Bremond believed that everyday devotion 'tends towards mysticism as its normal development'.<sup>232</sup> He argued that:

Out of reach though the mystic experience appears to us, it neither disconcerts nor repels as might a chimera, rather it attracts us like a promise. Instead of supposing the mystics superhuman, we are rather disposed to open the mystic career to all mankind. [...] it is not possible to ignore the mystics without disowning one's self.<sup>233</sup>

The relationship between religion and literature has been at the heart of Bremond's scholarly interests for a long time. In 1924 he was elected to the Académie Française, and at the annual meeting of the Institut de France on 24 October 1925 he gave a paper in which he discussed the idea of 'pure poetry' ('la poésie pure'). Bremond's address was met both with praise and objections, and marked the beginning of what Albert Thibaudet

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<sup>229</sup> Bremond never managed to complete his project. As Henry Hogarth remarks, 'he found such a wealth of material that the four volumes he originally planned expanded into eleven; and even with these he had not finished the first period; for only in the last of them does he begin to describe how rationalism triumphed over mysticism in the latter half of the seventeenth century. [...] Yet even in its incomplete form Henri Bremond's *Histoire Littéraire* has had a profound influence on modern religious study' (pp. 41–42).

<sup>230</sup> René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750–1950*, 8 vols (1955–1992), VII: *French, Italian, and Spanish Criticism, 1900–1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 83.

<sup>231</sup> Talar, 'The Historian and the Mystic', p. 180.

<sup>232</sup> Bremond, *A Literary History of Religious Thought in France*, II: *The Coming of Mysticism*, p. 444.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 432.

referred to as the ‘tournament of pure poetry’ (‘le tournoi dit de la poésie pure’).<sup>234</sup> Henry Decker in his study of the debate remarks:

There was then hardly a journal concerned with the literary movement of the time which did not offer either an article contributing to the discussion or a commentary upon it. [...] The widespread interest it created, and the number of writers of solid contemporary standing, added to those of permanent stature, who took part or at least cared to comment, make it the central literary controversy of the period.<sup>235</sup>

A year later, in October 1926, Bremond published his lecture accompanied by Robert Souza’s response as *La Poésie Pure* together with the volume *Prière et Poésie*. The latter appeared in English in Algar Thorold’s translation as *Prayer and Poetry: A Contribution to Poetical Theory* in 1927.<sup>236</sup>

Bremond conceived of ‘pure poetry’ as ‘a special knowledge’ born in poetic experience that ‘permits the poet to surpass the order of abstract ideas, or arguments, and to achieve the concrete, the real itself, insofar as one can attain it here below’.<sup>237</sup> He insists that this knowledge ‘is not sub – but is super-rational; a superior reason, more rational than the other’.<sup>238</sup> Poetry, thus, becomes a means of reaching out towards the ‘real’, which for Bremond was equal with arriving at transcendence and establishing contact with the divine. In *Prayer and Poetry*, Bremond traces back his interest in the idea of ‘pure poetry’

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<sup>234</sup> Albert Thibaudet, ‘Réflexions sur la littérature: Poésie’, *Nouvelle Revue Française*, 26 (January 1926), 104–113 (p. 104).

<sup>235</sup> Henry Decker, *Pure Poetry, 1925–1930: Theory and Debate in France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), pp. 1–2. For other accounts of the debate, see Deryk J. Mossop, *Pure Poetry: Studies in French Poetic Theory and Practice, 1746 to 1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971); and more recent Surette, *The Modern Dilemma*, pp. 233–272.

<sup>236</sup> Henri Bremond and Robert Souza, *La poésie pure avec un débat sur la poésie* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1926);

Henri Bremond, *Prière et poésie* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1926); Henri Bremond, *Prayer and Poetry: A Contribution to Poetical Theory*, trans. by Algar Thorold (London: Burns, Oats & Washbourne, 1927).

<sup>237</sup> Bremond, *Poésie pure*, pp. 94–95, quoted in Surette, pp. 265–266.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*

to A. C. Bradley's lecture 'Poetry for Poetry's Sake' delivered at Oxford in 1901.<sup>239</sup>

Bremond reminisces:

I still remember, after twenty years, the deep impression these pages made upon me. I did not understand them very well, but I felt that the reason of my incomprehension was my rationalist and anti-mystical prejudices. Since then these pages have not ceased to work in me, and if in my turn, I have been able to advance a step towards the solution of this unique problem, it is to Mr. Bradley, after Newman and the mystics, that I owe it.<sup>240</sup>

Having overcome his 'anti-mystical prejudices', Bremond took as his starting point Bradley's assertion that the poet 'does not address himself to the discursive reason of his readers'.<sup>241</sup> Bradley contests the notion of poetry as a didactic tool, arguing that its function is not to convey any moral instruction, teaching or argument. According to Bradley, 'pure poetry' is not an expression of a preconceived and defined content – it is something that 'springs from the creative impulse of a vague imaginative mass pressing for development and definition'.<sup>242</sup> The process of writing consists in giving shape to this 'imaginative mass', yet is not something of which the poet is able to take entire control: 'For only its completion can reveal, even to him, exactly what he wanted. When he began and while he was at work, he did not possess the meaning; it possessed him.'<sup>243</sup> Since the poet cannot claim to possess the meaning of the poem before it has been written, Bradley refers to poetry as 'both discovery and creation in one'.<sup>244</sup> The revelatory and creative aspect of poetry makes it enter the 'higher realms where poetry touches religion and philosophy'.<sup>245</sup> The purity of poetry that Bradley refers to consists precisely in 'the degree in which we

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<sup>239</sup> The lecture was published as the opening chapter of A. C. Bradley's volume *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, 2nd edn (London: Macmillan, 1963), pp. 3–34.

<sup>240</sup> Bremond, *Prayer and Poetry*, p. 66.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>242</sup> Bradley, p. 23.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 23–24.

<sup>244</sup> A. C. Bradley, 'Shelley's View of Poetry', in *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, pp. 151–176 (p. 172). Bremond quotes Bradley's argument in *Poetry and Prayer* on pages 68–70.

<sup>245</sup> Bradley, 'Poetry for Poetry's Sake', p. 24.

feel it hopeless to convey the effect of a poem or passage in any form but its own'.<sup>246</sup> He further argues:

Poetry does not present to imagination our highest knowledge or belief, and much less our dreams and opinions; but it, content and form in unity, embodies in its own irreplaceable way something which embodies itself also in other irreplaceable ways, such as philosophy or religion. And just as each of these gives a satisfaction which the other cannot possibly give, so we find in poetry, which cannot satisfy the needs they meet, that which by their natures they cannot afford us.<sup>247</sup>

Bradley, on the one hand, points to the close affinity of poetry, religion, and philosophy, yet on the other, he is careful not to blur the boundaries between them.

Bremond, inspired by Bradley's lecture, nonetheless redefines Bradley's understanding of the purity of poetry, removing one of the distinctions that Bradley was cautious to maintain. He puts forward a vision of poetry that is much more closely connected to religion than Bradley claimed it to be. According to Bremond, in the history of European culture, reason has been posed against poetry in a way similar to the manner in which it has been employed to derogate religion, which is one indication that poetry and religion share a special affinity. This affinity he identifies as a 'psychological mechanism' that allows the mystic and the poet to arrive at what he calls 'unitive knowledge'.<sup>248</sup> Bremond distinguishes here between conceptual, discursive knowledge that can be arrived at by means of reason and conveyed through the language of ideas and arguments, and a higher type of knowledge that includes the conceptual, yet goes beyond it, and leads to 'the apprehension of the real'.<sup>249</sup> One of the crucial questions that Bremond attempts to

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<sup>246</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>248</sup> Bremond, *Prayer and Poetry*, p. 155.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., pp. 155, 187.

find an answer to is the problem of whether and how such knowledge can be communicated. He enquires:

Is he then, *qua* poet, condemned to silence? Yes and no. His poetical experience not being a rational activity, not placing him in relation with truth by the intermediary of ideas, that experience remains in itself ineffable. The most beautiful words in the world cannot translate it, since words only translate ideas. From another point of view, it is a certain fact that the poet cannot hoard that experience for himself. The more magnificent it is, and therefore the more ineffable, the more he feels the need of communicating it. So he speaks, which is as much as to say that he expresses ideas, for speaking is nothing else. He takes the only imaginable means of entering into communication with us. But instead of this transmission of ideas, this didacticism being – as in ordinary language – the final and single purpose of the speaker, here it is only a means. By the intermediary of the ideas which he expresses, or rather by the intermediary of the very expressions he uses, the poet designs, not to teach us anything whatever, although he naturally cannot express himself without teaching something, but to communicate to us a certain shock, to train us to be worthy of a certain experience, to raise us to a certain condition.<sup>250</sup>

According to Bremond, to understand the situation of the poet better, it is worth comparing poetic creation to mystical experience. In their psychological design they are essentially the same, they only vary in the degree of intensity: ‘it is in [...] more or less vivid apprehension of the real that these diverse states resemble each other’.<sup>251</sup> Another difference that Bremond points out is the degree to which such an experience can be communicated:

The more of a poet any particular poet is, the more he is tormented by the need of communicating his experience [...]. The more of a mystic any particular mystic is, the less he feels this need of self-communication, and the more such communication seems to him impossible, should he have the desire to make it, as,

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid., pp. 75–76.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

indeed, in point of fact it is, all mystical grace supposes, ‘an absolutely gratuitous and free intervention on the part of God.’<sup>252</sup>

Bremond proposes to view the poet as somebody who, on the one hand, follows in the footsteps of the mystic and is offered insight into the divine reality, yet on the other hand, rejects the ultimate fulfilment in order to be able to communicate this experience: ‘mysticism is absolutely transcendent; poetic experience is, indeed, a preliminary sketch of mystical experience, but a sketch which, on the one hand, calls for the brush to complete it, and, on the other, rejects it’.<sup>253</sup>

In addition to his poetic theory, Bremond’s study offers a historical overview of poetic theories developed over the centuries, beginning with Plato and ending with Romanticism. In his discussion of the Romantics’ reaction against the ‘the crushing heritage of classicism’, Bremond approvingly quotes Murry’s essay from the *Criterion*:

‘For me,’ says Mr. Middleton Murry, ‘the fundamental problem is to define the relations between religion and literature.’ A new and purely romantic problem. It is, in fact, thanks to romanticism that literature has ceased to be a mere amusement, Malherbe’s game of skittles, Boileau’s worship of stylistic complications, to become the *great religious adventure of the human soul*.<sup>254</sup>

Bremond, thus, considers the elevation of poetic knowledge and the rejection of the eighteenth-century understanding of poetry as not more than a ‘mere amusement’ an exceptional achievement of the Romantic period, and hails Murry as a continuator of the great tradition.

The first among Anglophone critics to comment on Bremond’s theory was the literary critic Paul Souday, who contributed an article on ‘pure poetry’ to the *New York*

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<sup>252</sup> Ibid., p. 189.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., pp. 128–129. Bremond refers here to Murry’s essay ‘Romanticism and the Tradition’ published in *The Criterion*, 2.7 (April 1924), 272–295. The sentence quoted by Bremond appears on page 272.

*Times Book Review* in November 1925.<sup>255</sup> His view of Bremond's theory was highly critical. According to Souday, it did not offer much new insight and, in fact, was a misappropriation of Edgar Allan Poe's and Paul Valéry's thought (what Souday does not mention in his review, however, is that Bremond acknowledged the importance of Poe's and Valéry's ideas, but distanced himself from them). Souday argues that Bremond's grounding of 'pure poetry' in mystical experience and his references to God-given inspiration are dubious and 'extremely chimerical'. He proposes to return to Poe's understanding of this notion as 'rational harmony of verbal music' rather than consider it in terms of 'inspiration from on high' that cannot be proved to exist.<sup>256</sup>

In Britain, Bremond's theory found a more receptive audience, as it touched upon several questions that have already been raised in the noted debate between Eliot and Murry. Both Murry and Eliot found it important to clearly define their stances on the perspective offered by Bremond. His work was first reviewed by Murry in the *Adelphi* and the *Times Literary Supplement*. Eliot did not write a review himself, but solicited it from the critic Mario Praz, who shared his views on poetry and mysticism.<sup>257</sup>

Despite the fact that Bremond enthusiastically referred to Murry's work in *Prayer and Poetry*, in his *Adelphi* review Murry disagreed with the central argument of

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<sup>255</sup> Paul Souday, 'Poe and the Theory of Pure Poetry', *New York Times Book Review*, 29 November 1925, p. 9.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> John Middleton Murry, 'Poetry and Prayer', *The Adelphi*, 4.7 (January 1927), 403–412; [John Middleton Murry], 'Pure Poetry', *Times Literary Supplement*, 25 October 1928, pp. 765–766; Mario Praz, 'Review of *Prayer and Poetry: A Contribution to Poetical Theory* by Henri Bremond', *The Criterion*, 8.33 (July 1929), 740–745. Eliot held a high opinion of Praz's work. In his review of Praz's *Secentismo e Marinismo in Inghilterra: John Donne–Richard Crashaw*, Eliot wrote that the volume is 'indispensable for any student of this period and these authors'. Eliot also expressed considerable interest in the book on mysticism that Praz was working on in the mid-1920s (it was published as *Unromantic Spain* in 1929). Praz sent him a chapter, and in a letter of 7 November 1928 Eliot stated that he would 'very much' like to publish it. It came out under the title 'Mysticism or Advocatus Diaboli' in the April 1929 issue of the *Criterion*. T. S. Eliot, 'An Italian Critic on Donne and Crashaw: Review of *Secentismo e Marinismo in Inghilterra: John Donne–Richard Crashaw* by Mario Praz', *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 December 1925, p. 878. T. S. Eliot, 'Letter to Mario Praz, 7 November 1928', in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, IV, p. 309. Bremond's work was also favourably reviewed by Maude Petre and E. Watkin in the *Dublin Review*: E. Watkin, 'The Philosophy of Henri Bremond', *Dublin Review*, 183 (October 1928), 161–175; and Maude Petre, 'Poetry and Prayer: A Recent Discussion', *Dublin Review*, 185 (October 1929), 177–193.

Bremond's work. While he emphasised that he considered it exceptional that the 'pure poetry' debate was inspired by a Roman Catholic priest, he still believed that, due to his allegiance to Catholic orthodoxy, Bremond compromised ideas he could have developed further.<sup>258</sup> According to Murry, the poetic experience cannot be understood as inferior to religious experience, either in its nature or degree of intensity. He argues:

No, though I am willing – none more willing – to grant an affinity between the poetic and the religious experience, I cannot for one moment allow that the poetic experience is a subaltern form of the religious experience. [...] It is not poetry that aspires to the condition of prayer, therefore, but prayer to the condition of poetry. There will be, I am sure, no reconciliation between literature and religion unless this be accepted. We are not going back to religion; we are going forward to it. This is a time when our creativeness is critical; when many minds (in many realms) are at work to discover the implications of their own real experience.<sup>259</sup>

Murry claims that it is a common misconception that the end of the mystical path consists in the union with God. He argues that 'the true and perfect mystic only ascends to the One in order to descend once more to the Many with the knowledge of its Oneness to sustain him'.<sup>260</sup> Thus, he blurs the subtle distinction between the poet and the mystic that Bremond was careful to maintain. Murry supports his argument with the example of Jesus, whom he considers a great mystic who uttered his truth by means of 'the living, creative and significant word'.<sup>261</sup> In a review published in the *Times Literary Supplement* a year later, Murry points out a further problem with Bremond's work, which is its ambiguous approach to the notion of the 'purity' of poetry. On the one hand, Bremond connects it to

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<sup>258</sup> Murry remarked that hardly could he imagine that a similar debate might be possible among members of religious communities in Britain. 'It is strange to me that no famous champion of religion in this country', he wrote, 'has ever had a glimpse of the opportunity offered by the poetic experience as a corroboration of the religious experience. A dangerous corroboration, perhaps, but surely one worth attempting to secure if only as a means of interesting the more cultivated minds in religion once more. For the divorce between religion and culture in this country is painful' ('Poetry and Prayer', p. 404).

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 408–411.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 408–409.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 410.

the creative process and the experience of the poet, on the other, he devotes a considerable amount of time discussing the readers' response, which according to him should consist in a similar type of experience. This, Murry points out, unnecessarily complicates Bremond's 'brilliant little lecture'.<sup>262</sup>

When Eliot asked Mario Praz, with whom he exchanged ideas about metaphysical poetry, to review Bremond's work for the *Criterion*, Praz submitted a critique of the theory of 'pure poetry' written from a perspective opposite to Murry's.<sup>263</sup> Referring to Jacques Maritain's *Art et Scolastique* (1920), Praz contests Bremond's thesis that the experience of the poet and that of the mystic by means of their psychological design partake in the same order of knowledge.<sup>264</sup> He insists on maintaining a distinction between the two, and presents Maritain's stance on that matter as an authoritative view: 'M. Maritain deliberately contrasts mystic *graces* to aesthetic *emotion*. [...] While we have nothing to object to M. Maritain's rescue of mystical knowledge by the introduction of an uncontrollable element, the grace of God, we have many objections to raise against the conception of poetic activity as a sort of falling off from a mystical state.'<sup>265</sup> Thus, while Murry criticised Bremond for not elevating poetry high enough and making it subordinate to religion, Praz, on the contrary, finds fault with Bremond's theory on the grounds that it places poetic creation too close to mystical experience. For Praz, Bremond turns out to be too radical in his views, for Murry, not radical enough. Praz's reference to the authority of Maritain is also not accidental – it was very much in line with Eliot's recent engagement

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<sup>262</sup> Murry, 'Pure Poetry', p. 765.

<sup>263</sup> When Mario Praz read Murry's review in the *Times Literary Supplement*, he wrote to Eliot asking if Eliot was the author, and whether he could lend Praz Bremond's book and its English translation. Eliot replied in a letter of 31 October 1928: 'I did not write the leader in *The Times* on Brémond's book, but it seemed to me very interesting, so I am flattered that you should think I wrote it. However, I have the book, I mean the English edition, and will send it to you'. Eliot suggested that Praz could review the book for the *Criterion*, and in his next letter stated that he suspected Murry to be the author of the *Times Literary Supplement* review. As Surette has confirmed, his guess was correct. T. S. Eliot, 'Letter to Mario Praz, 31 October 1928', *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, IV, p. 302; Surette, p. 379.

<sup>264</sup> Praz, 'Review of *Prayer and Poetry*', p. 741.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*

with neo-Thomist aesthetics, which allowed him to rethink the relation between religion and art within a new, potentially promising framework.

*Jacques Maritain and Neo-Thomist Aesthetics*

When the ‘pure poetry’ debate began and Bremond’s work was translated into English, Eliot did not comment on it in writing. However, he was aware of the debate as he read the journals *Nouvelle Revue Française* and *Dublin Review*, which at that time published several reviews of Bremond’s work. The only early comment that Eliot made on Bremond’s work classified it as part of the Modernist movement, which Eliot already considered a thing of the past. In a 1928 obituary-review of Friedrich von Hügel’s *Selected Letters*, Eliot wrote:

Von Hügel, though not a Modernist, belongs to the period of Modernism. And von Hügel’s variety of Orthodoxy, I suspect, is as out of date as Tyrrell’s variety of Modernism. The last survival of the old Modernism is that elusive spirit which appears at the Abbé Brémond’s literary *séances*: La Poésie Pure.<sup>266</sup>

While Eliot did not offer any more explicit criticism of Bremond before the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures on Poetry delivered in 1932–1933, his indirect response to the interest that Bremond’s ideas aroused in literary circles was his turn to Maritain’s work. When Murry and Praz wrote their reviews of Bremond’s books, Eliot published in the *Criterion* his translation of Maritain’s essay on poetry and religion (January and May 1927), contributed with two reviews of Maritain’s works to the *Times Literary Supplement* (June

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<sup>266</sup> Eliot, ‘An Emotional Unity’, p. 110. Eliot published three more reviews of von Hügel’s work in the *Criterion*. The review of *Essays and Addresses on the Philosophy of Religion* appeared in ‘Shorter Notices’, *The Criterion*, 5.3 (June 1927), 363–368 (pp. 366–367); the review of *Reading from Friedrich von Hügel*, selected by Algar Thorold, was included in ‘Shorter Notices’, *The Criterion*, 8.31 (December 1928), 359–368 (p. 367); and the review of *Letters of Baron Friedrich von Hügel to a Niece*, ed. by Gwendolen Greene, was published in ‘Shorter Notices’, *The Criterion*, 8.32 (April 1929), 557–568 (p. 568).

and November 1928), and devoted a considerable space to Maritain in his article on Julien Benda published in the *Cambridge Review* (June 1928).<sup>267</sup> In 1928, he was also considering submitting an article on Maritain to the journal *Forum*, and in 1930, he solicited a review of *Art et Scolastique* from John Gould Fletcher.<sup>268</sup> Eliot's evident investment in Maritain's work stemmed from his hope that the neo-Thomist methodology Maritain was proposing could provide a new interpretative framework for the discussion of religion and literature – a perspective that would be a viable alternative to the theories of Modernist-minded Murry and Bremond. In fact, it is highly possible that initially Eliot considered Maritain the long-awaited 'astute theologian' who could once again separate religious and artistic values from the 'flux of [the] development of knowledge and information', providing a metaphysical basis on which a new 'unity' could be constructed.<sup>269</sup>

The publication of the first part of the translation of Maritain's essay 'Frontières de la Poésie' in the *Criterion* was accompanied by a commentary in which Eliot hailed Maritain as 'the most conspicuous figure, and probably the most powerful force, in contemporary French philosophy'.<sup>270</sup> The fact that Eliot changed the title of Maritain's paper – translating it as 'Poetry and Religion' instead of 'Frontiers of Poetry' (as it has been known in English since it was published in J. F. Scanlan's translation in 1930) – proves that he intended it to enter the debate on the relation of literature and religion that until now focused primarily on Bremond's theory.<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'The Life of Prayer: Review of *Prayer and Intelligence* by J. and R. Maritain', *Times Literary Supplement*, 21 June 1928, p. 460; 'Three Reformers: Review of *Three Reformers: Luther, Descartes, Rousseau* by Jacques Maritain', *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 November 1928, p. 818; 'The Idealism of Julien Benda', *Cambridge Review*, 49 (June 1928), 485–488. Eliot first met Maritain in person in Paris in summer of 1926. See Eliot, 'Letter to His Mother, 24 June 1926', *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, III, pp. 197–199 (esp. note 1).

<sup>268</sup> Eliot mentioned that he might write an article on Maritain in a letter to Henry Goddard Leach, editor of *Forum*, of 21 February 1928. *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, IV, pp. 52–53. John Gould Fletcher's review of Maritain's *Art et Scolastique* was published in *The Criterion*, 9.35 (January 1930), pp. 346–349.

<sup>269</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, p. 223.

<sup>270</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'A Commentary', *The Criterion*, 5.1 (January 1927), 1–6 (p. 3).

<sup>271</sup> Jacques Maritain, 'Poetry and Religion', trans. by F. S. Flint [T. S. Eliot], part 1, *The Criterion*, 5.1 (January 1927), 7–22; part 2, *The Criterion*, 5.2 (May 1927), 214–230. Jacques Maritain, 'The Frontiers

In his essay, Maritain discusses two dimensions of art: its transcendental ‘essence’ and its ‘conditions of existence’ in this world. According to him:

All things (like intelligence and art) which touch upon the transcendental order and are realised either in a pure state in God, or ‘by participation’ in created subjects, hold such an antinomy. In the very measure that they tend (with an ineffectual but real tendency) to the plenitude of their essence *taken in itself* (transcendentally), *and in its pure formal line*, they tend to pass beyond themselves, to cross the limits of their essence *taken in a created subject* (with the specific determinations belonging to it), and at the same time to escape from the *conditions of existence*.<sup>272</sup>

Thus, the purity that Bremond ascribes to poetry, in Maritain’s view is impossible, as it would imply complete transcendence. He argues that ‘to command our art *to be* art in a pure state, by effectively freeing itself from all the conditions of existence in the human object, is to desire to usurp for it the aseity of God’.<sup>273</sup> Maritain argues for the recognition of a radical separation between religion and art. For him, the ultimate creative impulse belongs to religion; art does not create but ‘transforms, displaces, brings together again, transfigures’.<sup>274</sup> While Maritain assumes a definition of poetry as ‘the divination of the spiritual in the sensible, which will itself express itself in the sensible’, he is careful not to equate poetry with metaphysics. For him the latter ‘isolates the mystery in order to know it’, whereas the former ‘manipulates it and uses it as an unknown force’.<sup>275</sup> The problem of modern art that Maritain draws attention to is its inability to recognise that it is different from metaphysics. This failing leads to constant disillusion and dissatisfaction; according to Maritain, ‘modern art does penance, it wears itself out, mortifies itself, flagellates itself

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of Poetry’, in *Art and Scholasticism, with Other Essays*, trans. by J. F. Scanlan (London: Sheed & Ward, 1930), pp. 87–122. All quotations from the essay are given in Eliot’s translation.

<sup>272</sup> Maritain, ‘Poetry and Religion’, pp. 9–10.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15–16.

like an ascetic who is mad to destroy himself in order to obtain the grace of the Holy Spirit, and who often remains empty of what a child has in abundance'.<sup>276</sup>

Just like Bremond, Maritain seeks to provide his theory with a historical dimension, presenting the condition of contemporary art as an end result of a pursuit of 'the frontiers of the mind' that began in the Renaissance, when art first 'opened its eyes on itself'.<sup>277</sup> A similarly important development of self-consciousness, Maritain argues, took place in twentieth-century art, and in Picasso's paintings one can see 'a terrible progress in self-knowledge'.<sup>278</sup> The progress is 'terrible' because, despite all its self-transgressions and self-mortifications, art is not capable of offering anyone 'eternal sustenance'. If one attempts to find the absolute in poetry, Maritain warns, he or she may be easily misled as poetry will offer a 'counterfeit of the supernatural and the miraculous'.<sup>279</sup> Using language that recalls the vocabulary of the *Pascendi* encyclical, he asserts:

Disguised as an angel of counsel, it [poetry] will lead the human soul astray on false mystical paths. Its spirituality, turned aside from its own direction and proper place, under the guise of an internal drama entirely profane, will give a new issue to the old heresies of the free spirit.<sup>280</sup>

Art in general, and poetry in particular, according to Maritain, should strive to recognise their limits, originating in their conditions of existence. While they can always 'tend to' purity, they should have the awareness that they cannot ever reach this state. Maritain makes a definitive claim that:

it is only in the theological light that art can advance to final self-knowledge, and cure itself of the false metaphysics that obsess it. By showing us where moral truth

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

and the authentic supernatural are, religion spares poetry the error of thinking it was made to transform ethics and life; protects it against presumption.<sup>281</sup>

The ‘final self-knowledge’ of art, then, consists in an acceptance of the fact that art belongs to the natural, not the supernatural, order of life. Maritain contends that ‘the sole end of art is the work itself and beauty’.<sup>282</sup> He rejects Bremond’s argument that poetic inspiration differs only in degree from the divine grace that mystics experience, asserting that art ‘does not reside in an angelic mind’ and insisting that while poetic inspiration belongs to the natural order, divine inspiration is part of the supernatural order (see figure 10).<sup>283</sup>

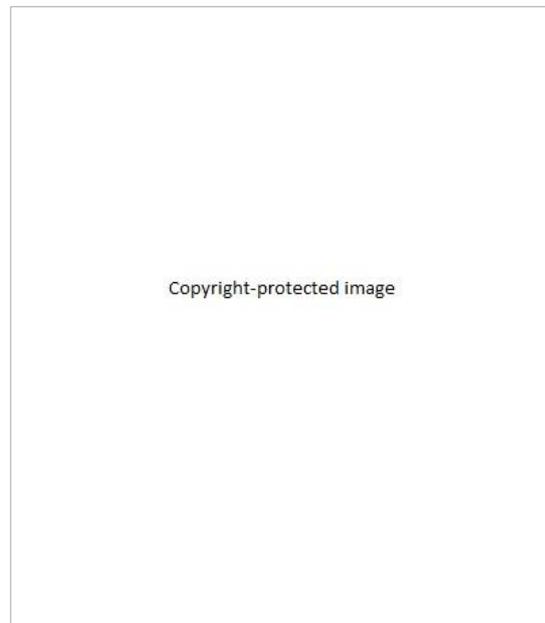


Figure 10. Modes of divine motion. A synopsis drawn by the neo-Thomist Reginald Garrigou-Lagrance and reprinted in Jacques Maritain’s *Réponse à Jean Cocteau* (originally published in 1926, translated into English as: *Art and Faith: Letters between Jacques Maritain and Jean Cocteau*, trans. by John Coleman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948); the synopsis is reprinted on page 122). Eliot was familiar with both Maritain’s paper and Garrigou-Lagrance’s work (he refers to Garrigou-Lagrance in his review of Maritain’s *Three Reformers* (see below)).

Maritain also does not consider art, as Bremond does, a mode of knowing. In his system, epistemology belongs to what he calls ‘the speculative order’ of mind, whereas

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<sup>281</sup> Ibid., p. 218.

<sup>282</sup> Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 74.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

aesthetics is the domain of ‘the practical order’, whose ‘orientation is towards doing, not to the pure inwardness of knowledge’.<sup>284</sup> Art makes a ‘work of beauty’, which produces ‘joy or delight in the mind through the intuition of the sense’, but cannot bring knowledge.<sup>285</sup> ‘The perception of the beautiful’, Maritain argues, ‘is related to knowledge, but by way of addition [...]; it is not so much a kind of knowledge as a kind of delight.’<sup>286</sup> Delight ‘stirs desire and produces love’, yet does not give access to truth.<sup>287</sup> For Maritain, then, ‘the artist, if he is not to shatter his art or his soul, must simply be, as artist, what art would have him be – a good workman.’<sup>288</sup> Art cannot claim to be a source of any supernatural knowledge or mystical apprehension. It belongs entirely to the natural world and its essence is circumscribed by its conditions of existence. Its only connection with the supernatural is that ‘from afar off, without thinking, it prepares the human race for contemplation, [...] the spiritual joy of which surpasses every other joy’.<sup>289</sup> However, what this preparation exactly involves, Maritain does not explain.

In the conclusion of ‘Frontières de la Poesie’, Maritain discusses the important role theology has to play in restoring the balance between art and religion that has been upset by fashionable ‘mystical’ speculations that promote neglect of intelligence and reason. He considers these speculations detrimental to Christian tradition, and warns that:

henceforward it is from ‘religion’ and the mind, and no longer from matter and ‘science’, that we must look for the great danger of the century. [...] A reign of the heart, which is not the first of all a reign of truth, a Christian revival, which is not first of all theological, would but hide suicide under the guise of love. The age swarms with fools who look down on reason.<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>284</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>290</sup> Maritain, ‘Poetry and Religion’, pp. 224–225.

Thus, the ideas that Bremond and Murry would, in one form or another, advocate are dubbed by Maritain the ‘heresies of the free spirit’ and considered one of the spiritual threats of contemporary times.

Murry was quick to respond to Maritain’s essay.<sup>291</sup> He argued that it is not modern psychological perspective that should be regarded as dangerous, but the inflexibility and the alleged ‘objectivism’ of the neo-Thomist system. According to him, the outdated scholastic thought of Aquinas can only be regarded as ‘a symbol’ of a unitive system towards which one should strive, but not as ‘a pattern’ to be followed in modern metaphysics.<sup>292</sup> Murry emphatically asserts that the Thomistic synthesis ‘once discarded, cannot be re-established’, and should be approached only as an inspiring model belonging to the past.<sup>293</sup>

Eliot’s attitude to Maritain’s work was complex and ambivalent. His initial response to Maritain’s thought was highly enthusiastic. Maritain’s work helped Eliot find a convincing and well-reasoned response to the arguments put forward by Murry and Bremond. In the *Times Literary Supplement* Eliot dubbed Maritain the ‘leader of Roman Catholic intellectualism’.<sup>294</sup> Soon, however, he expressed dissatisfaction with certain aspects of Maritain’s work. In Eliot’s view Maritain’s writing ‘always stimulates the

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<sup>291</sup> Another polemical response to Maritain’s theory came from the philosopher and critic Ramon Fernandez, a frequent contributor to the *Criterion*. In his *Messages*, he wrote: ‘Thomism is the work of a thought already terminated, a conception that has looped the loop. It links up, frames, and dominates problems which are not those we are anxious to solve. In its happy effort to conjoin the divine teaching and human experience of its time, it had to have recourse to means which have since lost their effectiveness. In offering Thomism to us as a modern metaphysic, Mr. Maritain is offering us a metaphysic incommensurable with modern experimental intelligence, *because it does not belong to the same spiritual baking*. It is an accomplishment composed for a melody entirely different from the one our intelligence is playing to us’. Fernandez, *Messages*, p. 269.

Eliot reviewed *Messages* in the *Criterion* in October 1926. He argued that ‘Fernandez is in danger of being an idealist without ideals’, concluding his discussion with an observation that ‘[t]he issue is really between those who, like M. Fernandez, and (if I understand right) Mr. Middleton Murry (otherwise very different from M. Fernandez) make *man the measure of all things*, and those who would find an extra-human measure. There are those who find this measure in a revealed religion, and those who, like Mr. Irving Babbitt and Mr. Read, look for it without pretending to have found it’. T. S. Eliot, ‘Review of *Reason and Romanticism* by Herbert Read, and *Messages* by Ramon Fernandez’, *The Criterion*, 4.4 (October 1926), 751–757 (pp. 755–756).

<sup>292</sup> John Middleton Murry, ‘Towards a Synthesis’, *The Criterion*, 5.3 (June 1927), 294–313 (p. 312).

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>294</sup> Eliot, ‘The Life of Prayer’, p. 460.

intellectual appetite’, but ‘it does not always give intellectual satisfaction’.<sup>295</sup> Maritain, whom Eliot now calls ‘the lyricist of Thomism’, appeals in Eliot’s view ‘to the heart rather than the head’.<sup>296</sup>

This somewhat puzzling dissatisfaction with Maritain’s ‘emotional side’ on Eliot’s part becomes perhaps more comprehensible when the definition of neo-Thomism that Eliot puts forward in one of his reviews is analysed in more detail:

The word ‘neo-Thomism’ may be taken with more than one meaning. It can be applied to the philosophic work of Dominicans and members of other Orders which has gone on at least since the pronouncement of Leo XIII in favour of Aquinas, including the work of such men as Rousselot, Sertillanges, and Garrigou-Lagrange. Or it can be applied to the popularization of intellectual Catholicism in the life of contemporary Paris. In the latter aspect, if we consider it only as an aspect, neo-Thomism has some of the appearance of a literary and philosophic mode. It represents, beyond its strictly theological import, a reaction against such philosophies as that of Bergson, against Romanticism in literature and against democracy in government.<sup>297</sup>

The latter understanding of neo-Thomism – that is, viewing it not only as a theological, but also ‘a literary and philosophic mode’ – seems to have been of key importance to Eliot. The neo-scholastic metaphysics of Maritain presented a philosophical system in which theology, epistemology, and aesthetics were assigned clear and definite places, and provided a tenable alternative to the anti-rationalist strain of Bergson’s philosophy and Romantic literature. It was due to his engagement with neo-Thomism that Eliot would define the direction in which his views developed as ‘classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion’.<sup>298</sup> Classicism provides here an antidote to

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<sup>295</sup> Eliot, ‘Three Reformers’, p. 818.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

<sup>298</sup> T. S. Eliot, *For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order* (London: Faber and Gwyer, 1928), p. ix.

Romantic emotionalism, royalism is a reaction to democracy, and Anglo-Catholicism serves as a corrective to the fluidity of Bergson's philosophy and theological Modernism. If one reads this statement within the context of Eliot's neo-Thomist sympathies, it becomes evident that he considered religion, philosophy, literature, and politics connected to each other within a wider framework of metaphysics. Conceiving of such a framework was a way of restoring the lost metaphysical unity that Eliot mourned in the Clark Lectures. He hinted at the fact that he considered neo-Thomism to have a potential to perform this work of restoration in the reviews he wrote in 1926 and 1927. They predicted that contemporary times may see a 'revolution' of the mind comparable to the 'dissociation of the medieval mind'.<sup>299</sup> That this revolution was to be brought about by neo-Thomism is made evident in Eliot's suggestion that '[t]he most fruitful kind of interest in the Middle Ages is not the interest in a remote or obscure "period," but the interest which finds lessons for the present time from particular traditions of art, of philosophy and theology, or of social organization'.<sup>300</sup> Neo-Thomism with its orderly metaphysics was thus enthusiastically hailed by Eliot as a system with an enormous potential (with which, however, what he considered Maritain's emotional side was not congruous enough).

Hugh Bredin concludes his discussion of Eliot's engagement with neo-Thomism by stating that its influence on Eliot is to be found 'principally, and almost exclusively, in his theory of society'.<sup>301</sup> However, Jason Harding's contention that Maritain's work 'had a profound and long-lasting effect upon the formulation of Eliot's Christian poetics' seems more tenable.<sup>302</sup> Maritain's thought, as Harding suggests, played an essential role in the development of Eliot's poetics and literary criticism of the mid-1920s, which exhibit a

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<sup>299</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Medieval Philosophy: Review of *History of Medieval Philosophy* by Maurice de Wulf', *Times Literary Supplement*, 16 December 1926, p. 929.

<sup>300</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'The Twelfth Century: Review of *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* by Charles Homer Haskins', *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 August 1927, p. 542.

<sup>301</sup> Bredin, p. 306.

<sup>302</sup> Jason Harding, "'The Just Impartiality of a Christian Philosopher': T. S. Eliot and Jacques Maritain" (unpublished lecture, T. S. Eliot Summer School, 2009), p. 5. I am grateful to Jason Harding for sending me this unpublished address.

strong orientation towards neo-Thomist aesthetics, as well as on his views on the relation of poetry and religion. This comes to the fore, for instance, in the preface to the second edition of *The Sacred Wood*, written in March 1928. Eliot admits in it that on re-reading the essays he wrote in 1917–1920, he realised that his interests have developed and expanded, and ‘passed on to another problem [...] that of the relation of poetry to the spiritual and social life of its time and of other times’.<sup>303</sup> He offers a definition of poetry as ‘a superior amusement’, adding that he puts forward such a definition not because it is true, but ‘because if you call it anything else you are likely to call it something still more false’.<sup>304</sup> This explanation is followed by a series of negative definitions, directed primarily against Wordsworth’s, Arnold’s, and Murry’s understanding of poetry, and concluded in a statement that ‘certainly poetry is not the inculcation of morals, or the direction of politics; and no more is it religion or an equivalent of religion, except by some monstrous abuse of words’.<sup>305</sup> Following Maritain’s lead, Eliot insists on a strict separation of the poetic and the religious. He reiterates the point in the paper ‘Religion without Humanism’ (1929). In a passage in which Eliot discusses the possibility of reconciling science and religion, he quite unexpectedly attacks Bremond’s theory of ‘pure poetry’:

The theologian says ‘of course dogma is not truth,’ and the scientist says, ‘of course science is not truth.’ Every one is happy together; and possibly both parties turn to *poetry* (about which neither scientist nor theologian knows anything) and say ‘*there* is truth, in the inspiration of the poet.’ The poet himself, who perhaps knows more about his own inspiration than a psycho-analyst does, is not allowed to reply that poetry is poetry, and not science or religion – unless he or some of

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<sup>303</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, 2nd edn (London: Methuen, 1928), p. viii.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. viii–ix.

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*, p. ix.

his mistaken friends produce a theory that Poetry is Pure Poetry, Pure Poetry turning out something else than poetry and thereby securing respect.<sup>306</sup>

Eliot's objection to the idea of 'pure poetry' bears here a clear affinity to Maritain's arguments. Eliot paraphrases Maritain's warning against taking the promise that modernity makes to artists at face value because it may make artists 'squander [the] substance' of art in attempts to 'secure respect'.<sup>307</sup> While Bremond is not named in Eliot's paper, the references to his theory would have been clearly intelligible for those familiar with it. Yet this was not Eliot's final evaluation of Bremond's theory. In the following years he continued to reflect on it, and in the 1930s he revised his opinion on Bremond's work.

### *In Search of Via Media*

When in the mid-1920s Eliot endorsed Maritain's neo-Thomism, he seemed to be increasingly frustrated with the way the term 'mysticism' was constantly misused by Modernist theologians and thinkers associated with their circles.<sup>308</sup> In 1928, Eliot went as far as to argue that Modernist theology was an instance of 'muddy thinking' that jeopardised the absoluteness of truth, producing 'half-Christians and quarter-Christians'.<sup>309</sup> He declared Modernist theology and the mystical revival to be things of the past:

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<sup>306</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Religion without Humanism', in *Humanism and America: Essays on the Outlook of Modern Civilisation*, ed. by Norman Foerster (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1930), pp. 105–112 (p. 109). Eliot sent the essay to Foerster on 13 August 1929, see *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, iv, p. 580.

<sup>307</sup> Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 37.

<sup>308</sup> See chapter 1, section 2: 'Mystical Revival in the Twentieth Century'.

<sup>309</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'A Commentary', *The Criterion*, 8.31 (December 1928), 185–190 (p. 188); 'An Emotional Unity', p. 112.

We have [...] a new attitude towards religion – we are brawling over Thomism and the Liturgy. [...] The present age seems to me much more an age of black and white, without shadows. Mysticism – even the particular Christian mysticism studied by von Hügel – is not the issue of our time. We are able to quote with approval that remark of Bossuet of which Professor Babbitt has reminded us: ‘true mysticism is so rare and unessential and false mysticism is so common and dangerous that one cannot oppose it too firmly.’<sup>310</sup>

Eliot’s endorsement of neo-Thomism, however, was not uncritical. Already in 1925, he expressed his dissatisfaction with Maritain’s *Réflexions sur l’intelligence* (Reflections on intelligence) in a letter to Herbert Read: ‘I think it a valuable and significant book, but nevertheless am a little disappointed with it. I feel that the man has been somehow in too great a hurry to arrive, that he has with good intentions fallen into the trap of zealotry’.<sup>311</sup> Eliot reiterated the difficulties he identified in neo-Thomism in a 1928 letter to Bonamy Dobrée: ‘I am myself aware of the ‘dangers’ of ‘creating a system’; though I should say that the dangers come not from creating it but from one’s way of holding it. Some of these Frenchmen, for instance, risk compromising Christianity by seeming to make it depend upon St. Thomas’.<sup>312</sup> While Eliot initially enthusiastically welcomed neo-Thomists’ achievement in creating a tenable intellectual system, towards the end of 1920s he seemed to grow increasingly doubtful whether it was the only right way of comprehending Christianity. In the mid-1920s, the neo-scholastic framework provided him with satisfactory answers to the variety of questions raised in his debates with Murry, and was a response to the need of ‘as precise and clear a creed as possible’ that he expressed back in 1924.<sup>313</sup>

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<sup>310</sup> Eliot, ‘An Emotional Unity’, p. 110.

<sup>311</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘Letter to Herbert Read, 11 December 1925’, in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, II, pp. 794–798 (pp. 796–797).

<sup>312</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘Letter to Bonamy Dobrée, [early February 1928]’, in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, IV, pp. 29–31 (p. 30).

<sup>313</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘Letter to Herbert Read, [18 October 1925]’, in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, II, pp. 513–516 (p. 514).

At the beginning of the 1930s, however, a distinct shift in Eliot's theological thinking can be discerned. Now Eliot only infrequently refers to Maritain or other Thomists, and in a number of critical texts he seems to contradict the theses he fiercely defended in the 1920s. Symptomatic of this change is the confession he makes in a 1930 letter to Bonamy Dobrée: 'I think we are in agreement that "Order" and "Authority" are [...] dangerous catchwords now [...]. I am as scary of Order as of Disorder'.<sup>314</sup> Eliot explicitly distances himself from his earlier search for the orderly and rational, considering it as extreme an option as disorder. The reasons for such a radical reconsideration of his previous stance could be multiple: the debates with Murry and Richards,<sup>315</sup> the 'pure poetry' debate, his wide readings in Christian theology and devotional literature, and perhaps the regular devotional practice that he commenced on his baptism and confirmation into the Church of England.<sup>316</sup> Eliot leaves a clue as to how this change could be interpreted in his essay on Archbishop John Bramhall. He hails this seventeenth-century Anglican theologian as 'a perfect example of the pursuit of the *via media*', which according to Eliot 'is of all ways the most difficult to follow'.<sup>317</sup> He asserts that finding 'the middle way' between various extremes is a strenuous effort, as it 'requires discipline and self-control, it requires both imagination and hold on reality'.<sup>318</sup>

If Eliot was searching for his own *via media*, neo-Thomism provided him with a firm 'hold on reality', yet perhaps lacked 'imagination' from which Eliot could not or did not want to resign.<sup>319</sup> While in the mid-1920s he emphasised the necessity of clear and

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<sup>314</sup> Bonamy Dobrée, 'T. S. Eliot: A Personal Reminiscence', in *T. S. Eliot: The Man and His Work*, pp. 65–88 (p. 81).

<sup>315</sup> For a comprehensive account of Eliot's debate with I. A. Richards, see John Constable, 'I. A. Richards, T. S. Eliot, and the Poetry of Belief', *Essays in Criticism*, 40.3 (1990), 222–243.

<sup>316</sup> Barry Spurr describes Eliot's worshipping week as consisting of daily private prayer and regular attendance at weekday Low Masses and High Mass on Sunday morning. For a detailed account of Eliot's devotional life, see Spurr, '*Anglo-Catholic in Religion*': *T. S. Eliot and Christianity*, chapter 5: 'Anglo-Catholic in Religion (1927–1965)', pp. 111–173.

<sup>317</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Archbishop Bramhall: Review of *Archbishop Bramhall* by W. J. Sparrow-Simpson', *Theology*, 15.11 (1927), 11–17 (p. 15), (repr. as 'John Bramhall' in *Selected Essays*, pp. 354–362).

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>319</sup> It is telling that in the January 1930 issue of the *Criterion*, Eliot published John Gould Fletcher's review of Maritain's *Art et Scolastique*, in which the place that Maritain gives to aesthetics in his system

exact thought, in 1931 he reconsidered his earlier views and argued that ‘[t]he admission of inconsistencies, sometimes ridiculed as indifference to logic and coherence [...] may be largely the admission of inconsistencies inherent in life itself, and of the impossibility of overcoming them by the imposition of a uniformity great than life will bear’.<sup>320</sup> Eliot finds a notable example of a Christian thinker who is able to admit the perceived inconsistencies of life and follow his own *via media* in Blaise Pascal.<sup>321</sup> In his essay on *Pensées* (1931), Eliot refers to Pascal as ‘a man of the world among ascetics, and an ascetic among men of the world’; a person ‘had the knowledge of worldliness and the passion of asceticism, and in him the two are fused into an individual whole’.<sup>322</sup> In the conclusion of his essay, Eliot recommends Pascal as the most appropriate religious thinker to be read in contemporary times, his special merit being the ‘unique combination and balance of qualities’.<sup>323</sup> In Pascal’s sensibility Eliot seems to have found a perfect embodiment of the balance he wished to see in a modern Christian thinker – ‘a new type of intellectual, combining the intellectual and the devotional’.<sup>324</sup>

This marked shift in Eliot’s thinking is reflected in his literary criticism, particularly the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures that he gave at Harvard University in 1932–1933 and the Turnbull Lectures given at Johns Hopkins University in January 1933.<sup>325</sup> In these lectures Eliot revises some of his earlier views and redefines his understanding of the nature and function of poetry. In the third Turnbull Lecture, Eliot significantly extends

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is put into question. Fletcher argues that ‘[i]n his revolt against all Tolstoyanism and thesis in art, Maritain seems [...] to be disposed to upset the baby, art, along the bath of morality; and in the outcome, he degrades rather than exalts it. This is because he regards all works of art as so much “human straw”’. John Gould Fletcher, ‘Review of *Art et Scolastique par Jacques Maritain* and *The Philosophy of Art* by Jacques Maritain’, *The Criterion*, 9.35 (January 1930), 346–349 (p. 346).

<sup>320</sup> Eliot, ‘Thoughts after Lambeth’, p. 376.

<sup>321</sup> Interestingly, in his memoir piece devoted to Eliot, Read wrote: ‘Perhaps the key to Eliot’s agony lies in this essay on Pascal; his was the same agony as Pascal’s, but I think that in the end Eliot resigned his life for that life, *stultified his speech* for that unspoken law.’ ‘A Memoir’, p. 36.

<sup>322</sup> Eliot, ‘The *Pensées* of Pascal’, p. 411.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 416.

<sup>324</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘Letter to Paul Elmer More, 3 August 1929’, in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, iv, pp. 566–568 (p. 567).

<sup>325</sup> The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures were published as *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* in 1933 and the Turnbull Lectures, which are a shortened and revised version of the Clark Lectures, are included in *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, pp. 229–295.

the definition of poetry he offered in the preface to the second edition of *The Sacred Wood*, in what appears to be an attempt to find ‘the middle way’ between Maritain’s neo-Thomist aesthetics and Bremond’s theory of ‘pure poetry’. Eliot’s definition is twofold: in the first part he asserts that the poet’s ‘first purpose is to amuse’, and in the second he qualifies this statement with a claim that ‘the ultimate purpose, the ultimate value, of the poet’s work is religious’.<sup>326</sup> The way Eliot now conceives of the religious purpose of art is reminiscent of Bremond’s emphasis on poetry’s capability to unite the poet and the reader to the ‘real’:

The artist is the only genuine and profound revolutionist, in the following sense. The world always has, and always will, tend to substitute appearance for reality. The artist, being always alone, being heterodox when everyone else is orthodox, and orthodox when everyone else is heterodox, is the perpetual upsetter of conventional values, the restorer of the real. He may appear at one time to hold one extreme opinion, at another period another; but his function is to bring back humanity to the real.<sup>327</sup>

Eliot’s new definition of poetry encompasses both Maritain’s understanding of the work of art as a source of joy and delight, and Bremond’s vision of poetry as an inspired devotional activity granting the poet (and possibly the reader) access to reality hidden behind appearances. Thus, Eliot raises the status of poetry from a ‘superior amusement’ to an act partaking in the restoration of the ‘real’.

Further, more explicit references to Bremond’s theory are included in the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures on Poetry of 1932–1933. As Surette remarks, such references probably puzzled Eliot’s audience, not many of whom would have heard of the French debate of the mid-1920s.<sup>328</sup> In his penultimate lecture entitled ‘The Modern Mind’, Eliot summarises the most significant theories of poetry developed in the recent period. He identifies in them a tendency to move beyond strictly poetic considerations – a ‘belief that

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<sup>326</sup> Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, p. 288.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 288–289.

<sup>328</sup> Surette, p. 249.

poetry does something of importance, or has something of importance to do' and a conviction that 'art, specifically poetry, has something to do with religion', though there is no consensus on what the importance of poetry consists in and how its relationship with religion should be conceptualised.<sup>329</sup> Outlining the different stances that critics adopted on this issue, Eliot mentions Bremond, who 'presented a modern equivalent for the theory of divine inspiration' and in whose work one can find 'many penetrating remarks about the nature of poetry'.<sup>330</sup> Eliot's main objection to Bremond's theory is, surprisingly, not his thesis that mysticism and poetic experience belong to one continuum, but the argument that poetry can be conceived of as an act of communication of a certain experience. This critique, however valid in itself, does not touch upon the key thesis of Bremond's work, which in fact Eliot is now ready endorse. In his final lecture, Eliot asserts:

That there is an analogy between mystical experience and some of the ways in which poetry is written I do not deny; and I think that the Abbé Bremond has observed very well the differences as well as the likenesses; though, as I have said, whether the analogy is of significance for the student of religion, or only to the psychologist, I do not know.<sup>331</sup>

While this time Eliot refuses to give any definition of poetry, claiming that he has 'no general theory' of his own, he adds: 'No one of us, when he thinks about poetry, is without his own bias; and Abbe Bremond's preoccupation with mysticism and Mr. Richards's lack of interest in theology are equally significant.'<sup>332</sup>

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<sup>329</sup> Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, pp. 125–126.

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>332</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 143, 148–149.

*'Marina'*

The poem 'Marina' and the circumstances of its creation are a good illustration of how the turn in Eliot's thinking and his renewed interest in mysticism were woven into his poetry. The poem was written in 1930, after Eliot read G. Wilson Knight's work on Shakespeare. In 1929, Knight was a budding literary critic who, having graduated from Oxford, had an ambition to publish a radically new interpretation of Shakespeare's late plays. He found his mentor in Murry. He recalled years later:

When [...] I was groping for a way to express what I had to say about Shakespeare, Middleton Murry's articles in the monthly *Adelphi* magazine acted on me like an avatar; and to his writings of this period my debt remains. Here was someone who without reservations was proclaiming the religious importance of literature in a voice of authority.<sup>333</sup>

Murry became for Knight 'the apostle of the new age', while Eliot he considered to be an adversary from the opposite camp.<sup>334</sup> On reading Eliot's *The Sacred Wood* and *For Lancelot Andrewes*, Knight observed that the essays seemed to him 'cool and urbane in manner', lacking the 'prophetic' quality that he found so appealing in Murry's writing.<sup>335</sup> Therefore, when Knight published his essay 'The Poet and Immortality' in the *Shakespeare Review*, it came as a surprise to him to learn that it was met with Eliot's approval: 'Eliot, whose critical writings had been, or at least to me appeared, in opposition to mystical interpretations, was strangely sympathetic'.<sup>336</sup> Encouraged by Eliot's positive feedback, in 1929 Knight sent him his *Myth and Miracle: On the Mystic Symbolism of*

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<sup>333</sup> G. Wilson Knight, 'J. Middleton Murry', in *Of Books and Humankind: Essays and Poems Presented to Bonamy Dobrée*, ed. by John Butt (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), pp. 149–163 (p. 149).

<sup>334</sup> G. Wilson Knight, 'T. S. Eliot: Some Literary Impressions', in *T. S. Eliot: The Man and His Work*, pp. 245–261 (p. 245).

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246.

*Shakespeare* and a selection of essays that he hoped to publish with Faber and Faber. The manuscript was rejected by the editorial board, but Eliot offered to personally recommend it to Oxford University Press and write an introduction to the volume.<sup>337</sup> It was eventually published as *The Wheel of Fire* in 1930.<sup>338</sup>

The unexpected interest that Eliot took in Knight's work is representative of the shift in his own thinking. Knight's insistence on writing 'mystical interpretations' of Shakespeare clearly went against Maritain's views that art and religion ought to be kept separate. Knight's belief that 'art is an extraverted expression of the creative imagination which, when introverted, becomes religion' was definitely much closer to Murry's and Bremond's views than to the neo-Thomist aesthetics that Eliot endorsed in the mid-1920s.<sup>339</sup> And yet, in a reference letter that Eliot wrote for Knight in 1937, he stated that he had 'a very high opinion of his [Knight's] Shakespeare scholarship'.<sup>340</sup> Knight did not expect such a positive reaction from Eliot, and was even more surprised when 'during the same year, 1930, [...] he [Eliot] sent me his 'Marina', inscribed 'for' me as "with, I hope, some appropriateness"'.<sup>341</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> In a letter of 4 November 1929, Eliot notified Knight that his essays on Shakespeare's plays were 'not quite the type of books with which' Faber and Faber were 'equipped to deal'. He added: 'I should myself strongly advise your submitting it to the Oxford University Press and if I could be of any help to you in that connection I should be very glad.' Eliot, 'Letter to G. Wilson Knight, 4 November 1929', in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, IV, p. 672. On 30 November 1929, Eliot wrote to Gerard Hopkins from Oxford University Press on Knight's behalf, asserting that Knight's essays are 'worth considering'. Eliot, 'Letter to Gerard Hopkins, 30 November 1929', in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, IV, p. 648.

<sup>338</sup> G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire: Essays in Interpretation of Shakespeare's Sombre Tragedies*, introduction by T. S. Eliot (London: Oxford University Press, 1930). All quotations are from the fifth revised edition (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1964).

<sup>339</sup> G. Wilson Knight, 'Myth and Miracle', in G. Wilson Knight, *The Crown of Life: Essays in Interpretation of Shakespeare's Final Plays* (London: Methuen, 1965), pp. 9–31 (p. 22), (first publ. as G. Wilson Knight, *Myth and Miracle: An Essay on the Mystic Symbolism of Shakespeare* (London: E. J. Burrow & Co., [1929]).

<sup>340</sup> Eliot expressed his high opinion of Wilson Knight's work in a reference letter that he sent to the Universities Bureau of the British Empire on 31 May 1937. In this letter, Eliot wrote: 'I have known Mr Wilson Knight in connexion with his essays on Shakespeare's plays, which have attained a considerable reputation. My opinion of these essays is sufficiently indicated by my having committed myself in writing the introduction to the first of the volumes, which was published by the Oxford University Press (*The Wheel of Fire*). Although I think Mr Wilson Knight sometimes presses a point too far, I have a very high opinion of his Shakespeare scholarship.' *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, IV, p. 293, n. 1.

<sup>341</sup> Knight, 'T. S. Eliot: Some Literary Impressions', p. 247.

‘Marina’, inspired by Knight’s discussion of Shakespeare’s *Pericles*, is built around the scene of recognition in which, according to Knight, ‘some mystic apprehension of a life that conquers death has sprung to vivid form, as it were, spontaneously: a shaft of light penetrating into the very heart of death’.<sup>342</sup> The scene, presenting Pericles’s reunion with his daughter Marina, and Knight’s discussion must have deeply impressed Eliot, as several years later in his Edinburgh Lectures he singled it out as the most powerful of all Shakespeare’s recognition scenes, describing it as:

a perfect example of the ‘ultra-dramatic,’ a dramatic action of beings who are more than human. Shakespeare’s consummate dramatic skill is as bright as ever; his verse is as much speech as ever: only, it is the speech of creatures who are more than human, or rather, seen in a light more than that of day.<sup>343</sup>

Eliot’s double emphasis on the ‘more than human’ quality of the characters in *Pericles* suggests that Eliot, following Knight, reads the scene as an intimation of something mysterious and incomprehensible, beyond what could be explained by human standards alone. What it exactly is he sets out to explore poetically in ‘Marina’.

The dialectic of life and death – so ambivalently played out in the concluding stanza of ‘Journey of the Magi’ – recurs in the epigraph and opening lines of ‘Marina’.<sup>344</sup> The title suggests that the monologue that follows will be uttered by Pericles, who in Shakespeare’s play after many incidents is reunited with his daughter, yet the epigraph interposes a much darker plot of Seneca’s *Hercules Furens*. ‘*Quis hic locus, qua | regio, quae mundi plaga?*’ (‘What place is this? What region, what quarter of the world?’) are the words that Hercules utters on awakening from the frenzy in which he killed his wife

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<sup>342</sup> Knight, ‘Myth and Miracle’, p. 17.

<sup>343</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘The Development of Shakespeare’s Verse’, unpublished lectures delivered at Edinburgh University in 1937, quoted in Freeh, pp. 112–113.

<sup>344</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘Marina’, in *The Complete Poems and Plays*, pp. 109–110. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

and children.<sup>345</sup> He gradually regains consciousness and begins to realise that he has taken the lives of the loved ones. Thus, the opening of the poem makes it impossible to determine whether the text leads ‘all that way for Birth or Death’.

The first words of the poem’s unnamed speaker echo Hercules’s:

What seas what shores what grey rocks and what islands  
What water lapping the bow  
And scent of pine and the woodthrush singing through the fog  
What images return  
O my daughter. (1–5)

The initial lines convey a sense of disorientation. The repetition of the pronoun ‘what’ and the broken syntax of the first two lines express the speaker’s bewilderment and confusion. Like Pericles, after a long sea-journey he reaches the land, but is surrounded by an aura of the unknown. The senses of the speaker are stimulated by the ‘scent of pine’ and ‘the woodthrush singing through the fog’ and his memory brings back the images reminding him of his lost daughter. The final line of the stanza can be read as an expression of nostalgic love for and the painful loss of the beloved child as the past enters the present through a spontaneous sensual reaction.

The second stanza brings a radical change of mood:

Those who sharpen the tooth of the dog, meaning  
Death  
Those who glitter with the glory of the hummingbird, meaning  
Death  
Those who sit in the sty of contentment, meaning  
Death

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<sup>345</sup> ‘Hercules [*Waking up in his right mind.*] What place is this? What region, what quarter of the world? Where am I? Beneath the sun’s rising or beneath the wheeling course of the frozen Bear? Is this the boundary set to Ocean’s stream by that farthest land on the western sea? What air is this I breathe? What soil lies beneath my weary frame? Surely I have returned to earth’. Seneca, ‘Hercules furens’, in *Tragedies*, trans. by Frank Justus Miller, 2 vols, Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann, 1917), I, pp. 1–120 (ll. 1138–1143).

Those who suffer the ecstasy of the animals, meaning  
Death (6–13)

The lines have been generally interpreted as evoking symbolic representations of four of the seven cardinal sins. Critics have differed on the meaning of the first image; some of them reading it as gluttony, others as envy or anger.<sup>346</sup> The following three images point to pride, sloth, and lust. What all four depictions have in common is the animalistic imagery. Death that the sins bring about deprives human beings of humanity, reducing them to no more than biological creatures. The foregrounding of the word ‘Death’ by means of a fourfold repetition and the special verse arrangement evokes a sense of the overwhelming scope of human corruption and the omnipresence of evil. Death, the inevitable consequence of the Original Sin, looms behind every wrong committed either in thoughts or in deeds.<sup>347</sup> The images evoked may remind Hercules-Pericles of the misdeeds he committed or witnessed in the past. The gloom of this stanza unexpectedly dissipates in the three lines that follow:

Are become unsubstantial, reduced by a wind,  
A breath of pine, and the woodsong fog  
By this grace dissolved in place (14–16)

The devastating evil brought about by the sins evoked in the previous stanza is deprived of its efficacy by ‘a wind’, ‘a breath’ and ‘the [...] fog’, which could all be read as agents of ‘grace’. ‘Grace’ does not erase evil, but makes it ‘unsubstantial’ by cleansing what has been corrupted.<sup>348</sup> The English words ‘wind’ and ‘breath’ are alternative

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<sup>346</sup> Critics have interpreted the image of the first sin in different ways: Christopher Ricks reads it as malice or anger (*T. S. Eliot and Prejudice* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 233), Piero Boitani (*The Bible and Its Rewritings*, trans. by Anita Weston (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 174) and John H. Timmerman (pp. 146–147) as gluttony, Anthony Hands (*Sources of the Poetry of T. S. Eliot* (Oxford: Hadrian Books, 1993), p. 154) as gluttony or envy, and Freeh (p. 119) as envy.

<sup>347</sup> On the importance that Eliot attached to the dogma of the Original Sin, see Schuchard, *Eliot's Dark Angel*, chapter 2: ‘Hulme of Original Sin’, pp. 52–69.

<sup>348</sup> For other possible readings of the complex syntax of the first three stanzas, see Boitani, pp. 174–176.

translations of Hebrew *ruah* and Greek *pneuma*, which can be also rendered as ‘spirit’, and bring to mind the acts of creation: of the world (‘And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness *was* upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.’ Genesis 1.2) and of humankind (‘And the Lord God formed man *of* the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.’ Genesis 2.7). The other important connotation is that of the Spirit which Jesus bestows – literally, ‘breathes’ – upon the Apostles after his resurrection: ‘when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto *them*, Receive ye the Holy Ghost’ (John 20.22). The stanza evokes the idea of creation and birth of new life through the spirit, in the face of which the death imagery of the preceding lines is obliterated. It also reinforces the sensory experience present in the first stanza: the synaesthetic ‘woodsong fog’ merges the sound, smell, and image, and ‘a breath of pine’ blurs the boundary between the natural and the supernatural. Standard sensory categories fail to fully capture the richness of this experience. This inexplicable work of ‘grace’ leads to the next stanza, which re-enacts the Shakespearian scene of recognition:

What is this face, less clear and clearer  
The pulse in the arm, less strong and stronger –  
Given or lent? more distant than stars and nearer than the eye (17–19)

The questions asked by the speaker bear witness to his inability to comprehend what he sees. His reaction closely resembles Pericles’s in Shakespeare’s play:

But are you flesh and blood?  
Have you a working pulse and are no fairy?<sup>349</sup>

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<sup>349</sup> William Shakespeare, *Pericles*, ed. by Suzanne Gossett, The Arden Shakespeare: Third Series (London: Thomson Learning, 2004), v.1.43–44. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

In *Pericles*, Marina has to answer a series of questions to make Pericles believe in what he sees. She challenges Pericles, saying: ‘If I should tell | My history, it would seem like lies | Disdained in the reporting’ (v.1.108–110). He responds to this with a resolution to suspend his doubt:

I will believe thee,  
And make my senses credit thy relation  
To points that seem impossible. For thou look’st  
Like one I loved indeed. (v.1.113–116)

It is love that makes Pericles take the risk of believing in something that his senses may defy. As Marina tells him the story of her life, he gradually arrives at the moment of recognition, and exclaims in joy:

O, come hither,  
Thou that beget’st him that did thee beget,  
Thou that wast born at sea, buried at Tarsus,  
And found at sea again! (v.1.184–187)

Piero Boitani links this joyous scene of recognition with the Apostles’ and Mary Magdalene’s reactions to seeing Jesus who has risen from the dead. Since Pericles had been convinced that Marina and her mother Thaisa were dead and he would never see them again, for him, as for Jesus’s disciples, ‘recognition lies beyond the mystery of death’.<sup>350</sup> On having recognised Marina as his lost and newly found daughter, Boitani argues, ‘Pericles becomes – to paraphrase Dante in *Paradiso* XXXIII – ‘figlio di sua figlia’, his daughter’s son, and [...] Marina is presented as the shadow of Christ made man, the parent of his mother: ‘god-like perfect’ and ‘another life | To Pericles thy father’, as he will state a few lines on.’<sup>351</sup>

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<sup>350</sup> Boitani, pp. 166–167.

<sup>351</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

Eliot's 'Marina' can be read as a poem bringing together Shakespeare's and the Gospels' recognition scenes. The recognition consists here in a rush of contradictory feelings and thoughts – in the apprehension of 'this' face that is at the same time 'less clear' (perhaps seen through the fog?) and 'clearer' (than it ever was in memories?); the pulse that is 'less strong' (than one would expect in a person made of flesh?) and yet 'stronger' (than a supernatural being's?); the being that is 'more distant than stars' (coming back from the world of dead) and simultaneously 'nearer than the eye' (being one's own flesh and blood). The speaker is certain that this 'grace' is something that he has received, yet he is not sure if it is 'given' or just 'lent'. The poem does not include any response from Marina that could help clarify this. Pericles can hear only '[w]hispers and small laughter between leaves and hurrying feet' (20), which could be his own reminiscence of the times when Marina was a child, yet which now belong to the world '[u]nder sleep' (21).

The sense that his long-dead daughter has crossed the threshold of death and been restored to him brings to Pericles a surge of memories and gives a new sense of hope and meaning to his life:

This form, this face, this life  
Living to live in a world of time beyond me; let me  
Resign my life for this life, my speech for that unspoken,  
The awakened, lips parted, the hope, the new ships. (29–30)

The despair and death present in the first two stanzas become transformed into new life. In the vow Pericles makes – which consists in a free and willing sacrifice made of his old life – he transcends his self and trustfully embraces the unexplained mystery of 'this face' and 'this life' that he believes has conquered death. Since language cannot grasp the heart of this mystery – it has already failed him when he tried to describe what he saw in the fourth stanza (the only way to do it was through a series of paradoxes) – he is also ready

to resign his 'speech for that unspoken', which evokes Gerontion's 'word within a word, unable to speak a word'. Yet now, in Pericles's immediate vision, the word or Word is 'awakened', just about to speak, with 'lips parted' and yet – even before any words have been uttered – Pericles believes that they will be words of new 'hope', opening new horizons and guiding him when he embarks on 'new ships'.

The poem's closing stanza mirrors the opening one, yet certain subtle alterations reveal the impact that the mysterious experience had on Pericles's perception of the world. The 'seas', 'shores', and 'islands' now appear to be directed 'towards' his ship (33), as if they were welcoming him back to the world and promising new journeys. The woodthrush is no longer 'singing' but 'calling' through the fog (34), which suggests that on his awakening Pericles is able to discern the meaning of the bird's song, and will respond to its summons. The mode of his being in the world has radically changed – through the work of grace, belief and love he has received a unique sense of a harmonious unity with nature. The final line – 'My daughter' (35) – serves as a powerful affirmation of life that has conquered death and imbued Pericles with new hope. The meaning of 'Birth' and 'Death' that Gerontion has missed, and the Magus has seen only 'through a glass, darkly', Pericles has experienced 'face to face' (I Cor 13.12).

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As this chapter has demonstrated, the question of the interpretation of religious experience in modernity was at the heart of Eliot's intellectual and poetic development from the early years of his Harvard studies. Eliot's poetry reveals his initial scepticism about the possibility of accounting for the meaning of religious experience, his subsequent endorsement of neo-Thomism, and a later turn to the mystical tradition. Eliot's engagement with mysticism finds its full expression in the meditative passages of *Four Quartets* (1936–1942), with

the final lines of ‘Little Gidding’ referencing Julian of Norwich – the celebrated mystic of Modernist theologians.<sup>352</sup>

In 1933, Eliot pointed out, quoting Jacques Rivière, that ‘with the advent of Romanticism’ a literary act has come to be seen as ‘a sort of raid on the absolute’.<sup>353</sup> This is a comment that brings to mind Maritain’s complaint that with the unfolding of modernity, art ever more frequently intrudes into the realm of religion. Yet Eliot’s observation has another meaning to it, one that well represents the shift in Eliot’s thinking. It is revealed when we read his remark in parallel with the lines of ‘East Coker’ that offer a metacommentary on Eliot’s poetic practice:

And so each venture  
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate  
[...]  
There is only the fight to recover what has been lost  
And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions  
That seem unpropitious. (v.7–17)

Eliot’s recovery of the mystical tradition prompts him to describe his poetic work as a ‘raid on the inarticulate’, which directly references the Romantics’ and Bremond’s ‘raid[s] on the absolute’, and which – despite the ‘unpropitious’ conditions of modernity – can succeed and, like Pericles’s search for Marina, lead to the recovery of ‘what has been lost’.

Just like Rilke re-appropriated the medieval Orthodox icon as a form open to the sensibility of the modern believer, Eliot revived the notion of mystical experience and its hermeneutic relation to Christian dogma. As the following chapter demonstrates,

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<sup>352</sup> Friedrich von Hügel referred to Julian of Norwich in his *The Mystical Element of Religion*, and George Tyrrell wrote a preface to the new edition of her *Revelations of Divine Love*, published in 1902. According to Jewel Spears Brooker, Eliot used the 1920 edition with Tyrrell’s preface (*XVI Revelations of Divine Love Shewed to Mother Juliana of Norwich*, preface by George Tyrrell (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1920)). See Jewel Spears Brooker, ‘The Fire and the Rose: Theodicy in Eliot and Julian of Norwich’, in *Julian of Norwich’s Legacy: Medieval Mysticism and Post-Medieval Reception*, ed. by Sarah Salih and Denise N. Baker (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 69–86 (p. 70, note 2).

<sup>353</sup> Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, p. 128.

Wittlin, in a similar way, aimed to recover the concept of sainthood, reinterpreting it as a notion fully compatible with and, in fact, indispensable to the war-torn world of modernity.

## Chapter 4

### Reinventing Hagiography: The Ideal of Modern Sainthood in Józef Wittlin's Poetry

‘The Apostle says, “the letter killeth, but the spirit quickeneth.” [...] And those religious are killed by the letter who will not follow the spirit of the Holy Scriptures, but who seek rather to know the words only and to interpret them to others. And they are quickened by the spirit of the Holy Scriptures who do not interpret materially every text they know or wish to know, but who by word and example give them back to God from whom is all good.’

Francis of Assisi, ‘Words of Admonition’, 13th century<sup>1</sup>

The question of how to rethink the traditional Christian model of sainthood so as to transform it into an inspiring ideal relevant to modernity was the most pressing among the praxis-oriented issues that early-twentieth-century theologians addressed. The response was expected to highlight the practical and social implications of the debates on the reconciliation of Christianity with modernity. Abstract theological questions, such as the nature and meaning of religious and mystical experience, the development of the dogmas, the hermeneutics of Christian revelation, were shown to be translatable into the everyday Christian praxis of modern believers. These questions, posed by many theologians at the end of the nineteenth century, gained increasing relevance in the first decades of the twentieth century, which saw the rise of widespread social movements (the trade union movement, the Russian Revolution of 1905, and the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917),

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<sup>1</sup> Francis of Assisi, ‘Words of Admonition’, in *The Writings of Saint Francis of Assisi*, trans. by Paschal Robinson (Philadelphia: Dolphin Press, 1906), pp. 3–19 (pp. 11–12).

growing political unrest, and finally, with the outbreak of the First World War, the violence of modern, technologically sophisticated warfare.

This chapter discusses Józef Wittlin's poetic works, which I read in dialogue with the theological debates concerning the notion of socially engaged Christianity and the modern vision of sainthood. Wittlin, twenty-five years Rilke's junior and eight years younger than Eliot, grew up in a Europe that was becoming increasingly divided over social and political tensions. Raised in a Polish-Jewish family in Lwów (present-day Lviv in Ukraine), he reached maturity on the outbreak of World War I. The experience of the war that brought an end to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in which Wittlin grew up, shaped both his poetics and his understanding of the duties and responsibilities of the Christian living in modernity. A major part of his poetry, I suggest, offers a reflection on a possibility of a Christian response to the horrors of the trenches and the aggressive political discourse and social unrest of the inter-war period. Wittlin's poetic explorations, I argue, are firmly grounded in the conceptual framework developed by thinkers associated with theological Modernism, especially Paul Sabatier and his provocative and ground-breaking rewriting of Saint Francis of Assisi's life. In an attempt to create a new model of Christian sainthood that could serve as an inspiring ideal for the war-torn Europe, Wittlin negotiates between the traditional hagiographic ideal of sainthood associated with the miraculous and the otherworldly and the modern necessity for positive social engagement that responds to the needs of those who are marginalised and oppressed.

This chapter opens with a short biographical account of Wittlin's life that helps to contextualise his work. It draws attention to Wittlin's rootedness in the culture of the Habsburg Galicia, which after the war was mythologised by many local authors. Wittlin confronts this myth in his poem 'À la recherche du temps perdu' (1934), in which he gives voice to Anna Csillag, a newspaper 'saint' of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Her would-be sainthood, elevated and detached, is called into question by her reaction (or lack

thereof) to the plight of those who suffered at the front. I argue that the ideal of Saint Francis of Assisi becomes for Wittlin a modern alternative to Anna Csillag's saintly disengagement from the world. Wittlin became interested in Francis's life in the 1920s, when he published a few chapters from a biography of Francis that he originally planned as a book (it was never finished). Francis also features prominently in Wittlin's poetry. Wittlin views his person as a model for socially engaged Christianity that reaches out to those who are humiliated and abused. In the 1930s, when anti-Semitism began to hold sway over Europe's political discourse and was embraced by a number of prominent Christian intellectuals and priests, Wittlin voiced his protest in the poem 'Święty Franciszek i biedni Żydzi' (Saint Francis and the Poor Jews). Ten years later, he himself was forced to flee Europe to save his life.

The final section of this chapter aims to show that Francis in Wittlin's poetry is more than just a saint who opposes social injustice. He is also a spiritual forebear of animal theologians, as his call to universal compassion towards those who suffer extends beyond the human to embrace the whole of the created world. Wittlin emphasises the importance of this model of attentive, compassionate care for the whole of creation in the poem 'Lament barana ofiarnego' (Lament of a Sacrificial Ram), which explores the Judeo-Christian religions' failure to account for the suffering of animals. It shows how through the lack of any environmental sensitivity, the Judeo-Christian tradition has refused to give voice to non-human suffering. The modern saint, in Wittlin's view, is a person who seeks to break this silence and works humbly towards creating a space of mutual understanding and reconciliation. Only when such an ideal is embraced by most Christians, Wittlin suggests, will Christianity be truly able to rise to the challenge of modernity.

Several scholars who discussed Wittlin's work have noted that religious imagery and symbolism play an important role in his poetry and prose.<sup>2</sup> However, apart from

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<sup>2</sup> Zoya Yurieff in *Joseph Wittlin* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1973) asserted that '[t]he meaning of Wittlin's *Hymns* – indeed of his poetry as a whole – lies in their religious sense' (p. 38). Romuald Cudak

passing remarks, there has not been much critical discussion of Wittlin's use of religious themes and motifs. Only recently has Ryszard Zajęczkowski concluded that issues related to religion were of primary concern for Wittlin and were constantly present in his private reflections.<sup>3</sup> As Zajęczkowski has pointed out, the full content of Wittlin's unpublished notebooks and personal journals has never been properly explored and still awaits a thorough critical examination.<sup>4</sup> The fact that Wittlin's reflections on religion in general, and Christianity in particular, are recorded primarily in his unpublished manuscripts is very much connected to the socio-political context in which his interest in Christianity developed.

Brought up in a Jewish family, Wittlin became drawn to Christianity only as an adult. His first volume of poetry, published in 1920, contains a number of Christian images and themes. By the mid-1930s, reflections on religious topics became extremely frequent in his personal journal, and he even considered getting baptised. However, he came to the conclusion that in the face of growing anti-Semitism and more and more violent persecutions of Jews, he could not possibly take such a step. 'In the time of contempt and

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drew attention to the religious imagery of Wittlin's poem 'Fear of Death', published in the volume *Hymny* (Hymns); Elizabeth Kosakowska read the religious language in Wittlin's novel *Salt of the Earth* in parallel with the mythological references present in the novel; and Krystyna Jakowska analysed Wittlin's usage of religious imagery in *Salt of the Earth* within the framework of expressionist poetics developed by the avant-garde authors associated with the magazine *Zdrój* [Spring]. Romuald Cudak, "'Otom przed Tobą, Abraham': Lektura wiersza Józefa Wittlina "Trwoga przed śmiercią"' ['I, Abraham, Stand before You': A Reading of the Poem 'Fear of Death' by Józef Wittlin], in *Studia o twórczości Józefa Wittlina* [Studies on the Writings of Józef Wittlin], ed. by Ireneusz Opacki (Katowice: Uniwersytet Śląski, 1990), pp. 34–54; Krystyna Jakowska, *Z dziejów ekspresjonizmu w Polsce: Wokół 'Soli ziemi'* [A History of Expressionism in Poland: On *Salt of the Earth*] (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1977); Elizabeth Kosakowska, 'The War as a Myth: The Analysis of a Development of the Religious Imagery in Joseph Wittlin's *Salt of the Earth*', in *Between Lvov, New York, and Ulysses' Ithaca: Józef Wittlin: Poet, Essayist, Novelist*, ed. by Anna Frajlich (Toruń: Nicholas Copernicus University, 2001), pp. 61–72.

<sup>3</sup> Ryszard Zajęczkowski, 'Wolne usta poety: Ethos słowa Józefa Wittlina' [The Poet's Free Lips: Józef Wittlin's Verbal Ethics], *Ethos* [Ethos], 97/98 (2012), 261–278.

<sup>4</sup> The journals and notebooks are part of the Józef Wittlin Collection of the Museum of Literature in Warsaw, MS 934–970. They reveal a wealth of information about the works that Wittlin read, include longer quotations from the texts he found inspiring (often accompanied by his own commentaries), and contain a number of drafts of his poems and prose pieces. The archivists who handle the Wittlin Collection are in the process of cataloguing twelve volumes of diaries that Wittlin used also as poetic notebooks between 1920–1975, and which include a number of early drafts of his works. While conducting research in the Museum of Literature, I was given access to these diaries and a provisional catalogue prepared by Małgorzata Wichowska. Since they have not been assigned a classmark yet, I refer to them as [Diaries] and provide dates for quoted entries.

hatred,' he recorded in his journal, 'I have the honour to belong to those who are despised and hated'.<sup>5</sup> 'Getting baptised under such circumstances,' he continued, 'would be a sin against the Holy Spirit.'<sup>6</sup> Thus, while in his private journal he began referring to himself as a Christian, he did not officially renounce Judaism and did not attend any Christian services. A few years later, Wittlin paid tribute to Henri Bergson (whose father, Michał Bergson, was a Warsaw-born Polish Jew) when he learnt that Bergson shared Wittlin's conviction that in the face of Nazism the ultimate act of Christian faith was, paradoxically, not to renounce one's Jewish roots.<sup>7</sup> Similarly to Bergson, Wittlin took a personal vow to remain with Jews as long as they were persecuted. He kept his word, and became baptised into the Roman Catholic Church only in 1953.

It is worth noting that Wittlin did not perceive the act of baptism as a climax of his spiritual development. Similarly to Eliot, he considered it the beginning of a difficult journey. 'I did not enter a safe, sheltered harbour, where my boat or ship will be anchored', he wrote in his journal after his baptism, 'On the contrary: now I will need to face storms. On 23 May 1953 I just hung up a flag under which I am going to sail.'<sup>8</sup> Wittlin, furthermore, did not regard his baptism as a break from the Judaic tradition in which he was raised. He saw continuity between his ancestral faith and the newly-acquired

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<sup>5</sup> Józef Wittlin, [Diaries], 12 vols, v: 1935–1937, [1937, p. 515].

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. A sin against the Holy Spirit, according to the Gospel of Mark, is the only sin that would not be forgiven: 'Verily I say unto you, All sins shall be forgiven unto the sons of men, and blasphemies wherewith soever they shall blaspheme: But he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation' (Mark 3.28–29).

<sup>7</sup> In his last will, dated 8 February 1937, Bergson wrote: 'My reflections have led me closer and closer to Catholicism, in which I see the complete fulfilment of Judaism. I should have become a convert, had I not seen in preparation for years [...] the formidable wave of antisemitism which is to sweep over the world. I wanted to remain among those who tomorrow will be persecuted. But I hope that a Catholic priest will be good enough to come – if the Cardinal Archbishop of Paris authorizes it – to pray at my funeral. Should this authorization not be granted, it will be necessary to approach a rabbi, but without concealing from him, nor from anyone, my moral adherence to Catholicism, as well as my express and first desire to have the prayers of a Catholic priest.' In 1940, when French Jews were required to register with the Nazi authorities, Bergson, in recognition of his achievements, was granted the status of an 'Honorary Aryan'. He rejected it, and chose to register like other Jews. Having spent several hours standing in line in cold December weather, he contracted bronchitis, and died two weeks later. See Nahum Sokolow, 'Henri Bergson's Old-Warsaw Lineage', in Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The Golden Tradition: Jewish Life and Thought in Eastern Europe* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996), pp. 349–359 (pp. 349–350).

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Zajączkowski, p. 271.

Christianity. ‘I am a Christian,’ he wrote in his journal in 1940, ‘because I am a Jew. My Jewishness helps me greatly to understand Christ. [...] I cannot see any problem with it. For me, the New Testament is divided from the Old Testament by only one empty page.’<sup>9</sup>

Wittlin’s poetry conveys his understanding of Christianity as closely related to its Judaic roots. His writing reveals that what he became particularly invested in was the idea of the Christian praxis that in the face of modern warfare and ideologies inciting hatred and contempt can provide a powerful and inspiring model of saintly resistance. In the following sections, I aim to show how Wittlin’s poetic explorations paralleled Modernist theologians’ attempts to promote a socially engaged model of sainthood, and surpassed them in extending this model to the non-human world.

### **Wars and Exile: Józef Wittlin’s Journey from Galicia to New York**

Wittlin was born in Dmytrów in Austro-Hungary (current-day Ukraine) in 1896. His parents soon moved to Lwów (also known as Lemberg in German, and Lvov in Russian; now Lviv in Ukraine), which before World War I was, next to Vienna, Prague, and Kraków, one of the centres of intellectual life in the Habsburg Empire (see Appendix 2, map 2).<sup>10</sup> Wittlin’s parents were assimilated Polish Jews, and they chose to send Wittlin to a classical gymnasium with Polish-language instruction.<sup>11</sup> At the outbreak of World

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<sup>9</sup> Wittlin, [Diaries], vi: 1938–1940, [January 1940, pp. 368–369].

<sup>10</sup> I base my account of Wittlin’s life on Yurieff’s biography.

<sup>11</sup> Wittlin was born and grew up at the time when Poland did not exist as a sovereign state. Since the late eighteenth century, its lands were divided between Russia, Prussia, and Austria (see Appendix 2, map 1). During the period 1795–1918, known as the partitions of Poland, the occupying powers took sustained effort to censor Polish language and erase Polish culture. These efforts were particularly concentrated in the nineteenth century, forcing major Polish authors and artists, including the poets Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki, to leave the country. In Wittlin’s time, however, Poles living under the Austrian partition (unlike those under the Prussian and Russian occupation) were given relative freedom to cultivate their culture. Polish language was reinstated in a number of schools, and Poles were granted a number of seats in the Austro-Hungarian House of Representatives. Hence, Wittlin could attend a school with Polish-language instruction and was free to publish his works in Polish. See

War I, eighteen-year-old Wittlin volunteered for the Eastern Polish Legion, established in Lwów in August 1914, yet dissolved just a month later. When the Russian army captured Lwów in September 1914, the Jewish community, considered by Russians to be excessively loyal to Austria, faced imprisonment and deportations.<sup>12</sup> To avoid persecution, Wittlin moved to Vienna, where he studied philosophy, psychology and art history. As his biographer Zoya Yurieff recounts, '[a]long with his formal education went a happy and intensive intellectual life in famous Viennese cafés, where Wittlin [...] was exposed to all the prevailing contemporary currents in literature and the arts'.<sup>13</sup> It was there that he met Rainer Maria Rilke, Karl Kraus, and where his long intellectual friendship with the budding Austrian writer Joseph Roth began.<sup>14</sup> In 1916, together with Roth, he volunteered for the Austro-Hungarian Army, but fell ill with scarlet fever before his division left for Italy. Incapacitated by his illness, he did not take part in the fighting, working instead as a translator in an Italian prisoner-of-war camp. In his spare time, he continued to work on the Polish translation of the *Odyssey* that he had begun back in Lwów.

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Norman Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland*, 2 vols, rev. edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), II: *1795 to the Present*; and Piotr Wandycz, 'The Poles in the Habsburg Monarchy', in *Nationbuilding and the Politics of Nationalism: Essays on Austrian Galicia*, ed. by Andrei Markovits and Frank Sysyn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 68–93.

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed account of the situation on the Eastern front, see Mark von Hagen, *War in a European Borderland: Occupations and Occupation Plans in Galicia and Ukraine, 1914–1918* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007). For a discussion of the situation of the Jewish community living in the Austro-Hungarian Empire during the war, see Marsha L. Rozenblit, *Reconstructing a National Identity: The Jews of Habsburg Austria during World War I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Piotr Wróbel, 'The Jews of Galicia under Austrian-Polish Rule, 1869–1918', *Austrian History Yearbook*, 25 (1994), 97–138.

<sup>13</sup> Yurieff, p. 18.

<sup>14</sup> Wittlin describes his meeting with Rilke in a letter to Wiktor Weintraub of 20 May 1971. He relates that they met in Vienna in 1914 or 1915 at a performance of *Hamlet*. It was staged by the Polish Theatre (Teatr Polski). Rilke attended the performance because he was intrigued that the role of Hamlet was given to a female actor. 'He was in a uniform of the Imperial and Royal Army – at that point he worked in the Archive of the Ministry of War – and this is how we met', Wittlin wrote, 'He was able to understand *Hamlet* in Polish, because he knew Czech and Russian – as far as I remember, he spent quite some time in Russia'. Józef Wittlin, [Letter to Wiktor Weintraub, 20 May 1971], Wiktor Weintraub Collection, Jagiellonian Library, Kraków, MS 331/07. For a detailed account of Wittlin and Roth's relationship and a comparative analysis of their works, see Jadwiga Maurer, 'The Demise of the Austro-Hungarian Empire: Józef Wittlin's *Sól ziemi* and Joseph Roth's *Radetzky marsch*' in *Between Lvov, New York, and Ulysses' Ithaca*, pp. 139–146.

The war proved to be a formative experience for Wittlin's philosophical, religious, and poetic development. In 1918, he returned to Lwów to witness the Polish-Ukrainian War that broke out after the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. After three weeks of fighting, the Polish Army seized the city. What followed was an eruption of violence and looting of the Ukrainian and Jewish quarters during a two-day anti-Jewish pogrom.<sup>15</sup> This experience shaped the way Wittlin, who considered himself both Polish and Jewish, thought about war and violence, and became a recurrent theme in his first volume of poetry, *Hymny* (Hymns), published in 1920.<sup>16</sup> The volume met with a mixed reception, because, as Yurieff notes, while most intellectuals in Poland were preoccupied with the question of Poland's future and 'rejoicing in their newly won independence' – by virtue of the Treaty of Versailles, after more than a century of political nonexistence, Poland regained sovereignty – Wittlin drew attention to moral questions brought about by the war as well as its social and religious implications. In the following years, he spoke out against warfare in his collection of essays *Wojna, pokój i dusza poety* (War, Peace, and the Poet's Soul) and in the articles that he contributed to various magazines and journals.<sup>17</sup>

In the 1920s, Wittlin became associated with two major literary groups, *Zdrój* (Spring) and *Skamander* (Scamander), and published his verse and prose in their journals.<sup>18</sup> He worked as a teacher in a secondary school in Lwów, and then as a literary director in a theatre in Łódź. In 1927, he and his wife moved to Warsaw, where they lived

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<sup>15</sup> See Christoph Mick, 'War and Conflicting Memories – Poles, Ukrainians and Jews in Lvov 1914–1939', *Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook*, 4 (2005), 257–278; and William W. Hagen, 'The Moral Economy of Popular Violence: The Pogrom in Lwów, November 1918', in *Antisemitism and Its Opponents in Modern Poland*, ed. by Robert Blobaum (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), pp. 124–147.

<sup>16</sup> Józef Wittlin, *Hymny* [Hymns] (Poznań: Zdrój, 1920), reprinted in revised form in 1927 and 1929.

<sup>17</sup> Józef Wittlin, *Wojna, pokój i dusza poety: Szkice literackie i przemówienia* [War, Peace and the Poet's Soul: Literary Essays and Lectures] (Zamość: Pomarański, 1925), (repr. in parts in Józef Wittlin, *Orfeusz w piekle XX wieku* [Orpheus in the Inferno of the Twentieth Century], (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2000), pp. 16–72, 430–436).

<sup>18</sup> *Zdrój* was published in 1917–1922 by a group of Poznań-based artists and writers, who in their manifesto endorsed Bergson's reassessment of the value of intuition and emphasised the significance of the Romantic tradition. *Skamander* was founded in Warsaw in 1920 by a group of experimental poets who aimed to celebrate everyday experience in an everyday, colloquial language so as to restore poetry's relevance to the lives of ordinary people.

until 1939. In the late 1920s and 1930s, Wittlin travelled widely around Europe, visiting Serbia, Italy, and France, and described his tours in numerous essays and articles. The year 1936 saw the publication of Wittlin's major and widely acclaimed work, the novel *Sól ziemi* (*Salt of the Earth*).<sup>19</sup> It tells the story of a Hutsul peasant who is drafted into the Austro-Hungarian Army and continually fails to comprehend the alienating experience of the war. The novel soon got translated into a number of languages (German, Dutch, Czech, and Russian in 1937, with translations into English, French, Italian, Swedish and Hungarian following in 1939), and in 1939 Wittlin became a candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature.<sup>20</sup> After the American edition of the novel came out in 1941, it won Wittlin the American Academy of Arts and Letters and National Institute of Arts and Letters awards.

The outbreak of World War II found Wittlin in Paris. His wife and daughter, who were still in Warsaw, managed to join him in 1940. Seeking to escape the approaching Nazi army, they moved to Portugal. Ultimately, to save their lives, they fled to the United States. Arriving in New York in January 1941, Wittlin was shattered. He left behind a number of relatives and friends, some of whom would perish in the Holocaust, and lost many of his manuscripts (the manuscript of his biography of Saint Francis of Assisi burnt during the Nazi invasion of Warsaw, and the suitcase with the manuscript of the second volume of *Salt of the Earth* was thrown into the waters of the Lisbon harbour during a chaotic embarkation).<sup>21</sup> For many years to follow, Wittlin would suffer from what he

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<sup>19</sup> Józef Wittlin, *Sól ziemi* (Warszawa: Towarzystwo Rój, 1936; repr. in New York: Towarzystwo Rój, 1954; Warszawa: PIW, 1988; and Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1991). It was published in English as Joseph Wittlin, *Salt of the Earth: A Novel*, trans. by Pauline de Chary (London: Methuen & Co., 1939; repr. in New York: Sheridan House, 1941; and Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1970).

<sup>20</sup> See J. D. Beresford, 'Novels of the Week: *Salt of the Earth* by Joseph Wittlin', *Times Literary Supplement*, 3 June 1939, p. 325; and John Cournos, 'A Prize-Winning Novel from Poland', *New York Times*, 5 October 1941, p. BR8.

<sup>21</sup> Wittlin and his family's escape from Europe and the difficulties they had to overcome on their way are described in detail in a memoir published recently by his daughter: Elizabeth Wittlin-Lipton, *From One Day to Another: A Fashion Reportage in a Period of Conflict*, ed. by Lisko MacMillan (Madrid: Facta, 2011).

called ‘the Noah complex’ – a feeling of guilt that out of the millions of European Jews, he was among those who survived.<sup>22</sup> He wrote about his feelings of alienation and the experience of being a writer in exile in the lecture ‘Blaski i nędze wygnania’ (‘Sorrow and Grandeur in Exile’).<sup>23</sup>

Wittlin decided not to return to Poland after World War II, as he did not agree with the politics of the Soviet regime. He knew that if he had wanted to publish, he would have been obliged to comply with the socialist realist doctrine enforced by the government. After 1945, all independent publishers and news agencies were banned, and all printed works had to pass through the hands of Soviet censors. Those who did not comply would not be printed and, thus, were excluded from literary and cultural life. Wittlin found this situation unacceptable, and chose to stay in the United States for the rest of his life, working for a number of literary journals and Radio Free Europe.<sup>24</sup> He died in New York in 1976.

After 1945, Wittlin’s sharp criticism of the communist regime resulted in a ban on his works in Poland. None of his texts would be printed by any Polish publisher until 1978, when a volume of his collected poems came out in Warsaw.<sup>25</sup> It was only in the 1980s that literary critics in Poland could begin openly discussing Wittlin’s work and introduce him

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<sup>22</sup> The condition, known as the survivor syndrome, has been extensively studied by psychologists and psychiatrists and is considered a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder. See, for instance, Yoram Barak, Henry Szor, ‘Lifelong Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Evidence from Aging Holocaust Survivors’, *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience*, 2.1 (2000), 57–62.

<sup>23</sup> Józef Wittlin, ‘Blaski i nędze wygnania’, lecture delivered at the PEN Club in Exile in New York on 27 February 1957, first published in *Kultura*, 9.143 (1959), 3–15 (repr. in *Orfeusz w piekle XX wieku* [Orpheus in the Inferno of the Twentieth Century], pp. 153–168). It was published in English as Joseph Wittlin ‘Sorrow and Grandeur in Exile’, *Polish Review*, 2.2/3 (1957), 99–112.

<sup>24</sup> Radio Free Europe played an important role in East-Central Europe during the Cold War, being one of the major sources of uncensored information for the citizens of the Soviet bloc. It also provided a forum for dissent for anti-communist underground movements. See Arch Puddington, *Freedom Radios: How Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty Broke the Soviet Information Blockade* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2000); and Richard H. Cummings, *Cold War Radio: The Dangerous History of American Broadcasting in Europe, 1950–1989* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009). Wittlin’s talks that were broadcast on Radio Free Europe have not been published yet. They are part of the Józef Wittlin Collection of the Józef Piłsudski Institute of America for Research in the Modern History of Poland in New York.

<sup>25</sup> Józef Wittlin, *Poezje* [Poems] (Warszawa: PIW, 1978).

to Polish readers.<sup>26</sup> While the last two decades saw a number of publications examining various aspects of Wittlin's oeuvre, there are still many dimensions of his writing that have not yet been thoroughly studied.<sup>27</sup> Witold Gombrowicz, another eminent Polish émigré author and Wittlin's friend, observed that Wittlin's work eludes easy classifications and often appears to be self-contradictory, because he seemed to be:

the denizen of ten realities: a poet who is a prose writer, a saint who is rebellious, a classic related to the avant-garde, a patriot and cosmopolitan, and a social activist who is a loner. [...]. The force of Wittlin's rebellion lies in the fact that he does not want to rebel and if he does so, it is because he must. This is why none of us is as convincing as he is and no one else's word is as capable of reconciling people otherwise ossified in their prejudices.<sup>28</sup>

This chapter aims to contribute to a better understanding of Wittlin's poetry by proposing to set it in the context of contemporary theological debates. This, I argue, will illuminate certain aspects of Wittlin's work that have hitherto been unnoticed and demonstrate that the idea of reconciling Christianity with modernity by imaging a new model of modern sainthood was central to his poetic project.

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<sup>26</sup> The first monograph on Wittlin's work written in Polish, Krystyna Jakowska's *Z dziejów ekspresjonizmu w Polsce: Wokół 'Soli ziemi'* [A History of Expressionism in Poland: On *Salt of the Earth*], was published in 1977. It greatly contributed to a revival of critics' interest in Wittlin and sparked fresh discussions about his work.

<sup>27</sup> Considerable attention has been paid to *Salt of the Earth* and its relation to other World War I novels, and to Wittlin's essays recording the life of pre-war Austro-Hungarian province and inter-war Poland. See Zoya Yurieff, 'The Image of World War I in *Salt of the Earth* by Józef Wittlin and in *August 1914* by Alexander Solzhenitsyn', in *Between Lvov, New York, and Ulysses' Ithaca*, pp. 3–23; Anna Frajlich, 'Two Unknown Soldiers', in the same volume, pp. 47–60; and Joanna Rostropowicz Clark, 'Laughter and Death: Józef Wittlin's Reflective Humour in *Orpheus in the Inferno of the Twentieth Century*', in the same volume, pp. 105–111.

<sup>28</sup> Witold Gombrowicz, *Diary*, trans. by Lillian Vallee (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 72. On Wittlin and Gombrowicz's friendship, see Jerzy Jarzębski, 'Gombrowicz and Wittlin: Two Conspirators' in *Between Lvov, New York, and Ulysses' Ithaca*, pp. 187–200.

## **Anna Csillag: The Patron Saint of Galicia**

Wittlin's investment in the reconceptualisation of the medieval genre of hagiography, I suggest, ought to be read in the context of contemporary theological disputes about the manner in which modernity requires a radical revision of the traditional saints' lives narratives. In 1905, the Belgian Jesuit Hippolyte Delehaye proposed to adopt a more critical attitude towards 'the vague sentiment which endows hagiographers with some mysterious privilege of immunity from the errors of human frailty to which all other categories of writers are liable'.<sup>29</sup> As it soon turned out, his study *Les Légendes hagiographiques* (*The Legends of the Saints*), together with works by other members of the Bollandist society that united Jesuit historians and philologists studying lives of saints and martyrs, became a major landmark in the history of hagiography. The Bollandists' objective was to establish new critical editions of hagiographies based on extensive historical research and newly available archival material. Inspired by a new approach to historiography, they 'aimed at transcending a binary mentality [...] which equated myth or legend with falsity and history with factual truth'.<sup>30</sup> They proposed to revise traditional accounts of saints' lives in the light of the existing documents and contemporary socio-historical research, so as to provide a solid scholarly counter-balance to the sentimental legends of the miraculous and supernatural that over the centuries have come to surround most Christian saints.

One of the first studies that set the precedent for such a revisionist approach and won great popularity among scholars and lay readers alike was Paul Sabatier's *Vie de saint*

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<sup>29</sup> Hippolyte Delehaye, *The Legends of the Saints: An Introduction to Hagiography*, trans. by V. M. Crawford (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907), p. ix. Originally published as *Les Légendes hagiographiques* (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1905).

<sup>30</sup> C. J. T. Talar, 'Discourse on Method: Hippolyte Delehaye's *Légendes hagiographiques*', in *Medieval Saints in Late Nineteenth Century French Culture: Eight Essays*, ed. by Elizabeth Emery and Laurie Postlewaite (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2004), pp. 139–160 (p. 145).

*François d'Assise (Life of Saint Francis of Assisi)*. Published in 1893, it was soon translated into English and German.<sup>31</sup> Sabatier was a Calvinist pastor with keen interest in the movement of Modernism and an ardent advocate of the critical historical method.<sup>32</sup> His account of Francis's life is preceded by a critical discussion of the primary and secondary material available, as well as an exposition of Sabatier's views of the nature of historiography. He strongly advocates a hermeneutic approach to history, drawing attention to the subjective dimension of history-writing. He emphasises that there is no objective and universally-accessible past since historical interpretation is always necessarily to a certain extent subjective:

History is a landscape, and like those of nature it is continually changing. Two persons who look at it at the same time do not find in it the same charm, and you yourself, if you had it continually before your eyes, would never see it twice alike. [...] It is the same with the landscapes of history. Narrow minds cannot accommodate themselves to these perpetual transformations: they want an objective history in which the author will study the people as a chemist studies a body. It is very possible that there may be laws for historic evolution and social transformations as exact as those of chemical combinations, and we must hope that in the end they will be discovered; but for the present there is no purely objective truth of history.<sup>33</sup>

Since, according to Sabatier, an objective view of history is a 'utopia', he urges a critical examination of saints' biographies, accusing official Church historians of adorning their

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<sup>31</sup> Paul Sabatier, *Vie de saint François d'Assise* (Paris: Libraire Fischbacher, 1893); published in English as *Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, trans. by Louise Seymour Houghton (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1894); in German as *Das Leben des heiligen Franz von Assisi*, trans. by Margarete Lisco (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1895). All quotations are from the English translation. On the theological impact of Sabatier's study, see C. J. T. Talar, 'Saint of Authority and the Saint of the Spirit: Paul Sabatier's *Vie de saint François d'Assise*', in *Sanctity and Secularity during the Modernist Period: Six Perspectives on Hagiography Around 1900*, ed. by Lawrence F. Barmann and C. J. T. Talar (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1999), pp. 131–150; and C. N. L. Brooke, 'Paul Sabatier and St. Francis of Assisi', in *St. Francis of Assisi: Essays in Commemoration, 1982*, ed. by Maurice W. Sheehan (St Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1982), pp. 41–58.

<sup>32</sup> In 1908, Sabatier delivered the Jowett Lectures on Modernism at the Passmore Edwards Settlement, London. Eliot included their published version in his syllabus for the course on 'Tendencies of Contemporary French Thought' in 1916. See chapter 3, section 2: 'Rethinking the Incarnation'.

<sup>33</sup> Sabatier, *Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, p. xxxi.

narratives with superfluous ‘embellishments’ and portraying saints as ‘superhuman creatures, having nothing in common with us’:<sup>34</sup>

they are privileged characters, marked with the divine seal; they are, as the litanies say, vials of election, into which God has poured the sweetest perfumes; their sanctity is revealed almost in spite of themselves; they are born saints as others are born kings or slaves, their life is set out against the golden background of a tryptich, and not against the sombre background of reality. By such means the saints, perhaps, gain something in the respect of the superstitious; but their lives lose something of virtue and of communicable strength. Forgetting that they were men like ourselves, we no longer bear in our conscience the command, ‘Go and do likewise.’<sup>35</sup>

Both Sabatier and Delehaye in their attempts to reform and modernise hagiography seek to recover the ‘communicable strength’ of saints’ lives, and present them in a way that would make them both convincing and inspiring for the modern reader. This meant finding a balance between the otherworldliness of saints and their humanity. Sabatier’s and Delehaye’s approach met with considerable criticism from the Vatican. Sabatier’s book was placed on the Index, whereas Delehaye was asked to revise parts of his work. It was feared that a critical examination of saints’ lives that undermines the truth value of a number of miraculous stories and legends might soon foster a similar approach to reading and interpreting the Scripture.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, their studies got translated into a number of languages and, in Sabatier’s case, gained instant popularity and scholarly appreciation from the French Academy.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. xxxiii–xxxiv.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. xxxiv.

<sup>36</sup> See van der Wall, *The Enemy within*, pp. 31–32.

<sup>37</sup> Between 1894 and 1910, *Vie de saint François d’Assise* ran into thirty-nine editions in France alone. It greatly contributed to reviving interest in Francis of Assisi across Europe, and a number of studies of his life and Franciscan spirituality followed. In 1902, Sabatier founded the International Society for Franciscan Studies, which aimed to promote research on Franciscan spirituality and publish primary and secondary sources on the history of the Franciscan order. See also Barrie Williams, *The Franciscan Revival in the Anglican Communion* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1982); and André Vauchez, *Francis of Assisi: The Life and Afterlife of a Medieval Saint*, trans. by Michael F. Cusato (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 324–336.

Wittlin became familiar with Sabatier's work in the early 1920s, when he developed an interest in Saint Francis and began researching his life in preparation for writing his own biography of Francis.<sup>38</sup> Sabatier's study had a much more profound influence on Wittlin than other biographies of Saint Francis that he studied. It inspired his reflections on the idea of modern sainthood, which became central to a number of his poems and prose texts. Similarly to Sabatier, Wittlin ascertained the necessity to revise the traditional ideal of sainthood, which he considered too disengaged from the contemporary world. He poetically explored this issue in the poem with the Proustian title 'À la recherche du temps perdu' (1933). Its larger part is a monologue of Anna Csillag, an imaginary, astral (the Hungarian surname translates as 'star'), mythical saint of the Habsburg Empire:

I, Anna Csillag of the luxuriant hair,  
Smiling sweetly, ever the same,  
Have for thirty years reigned over the columns  
Of your newspapers, as though a saint.

I hold a spray of stars as though it were a lily.  
Time does not alter my angelic beauty:  
Downy carpet of unfastened hair  
Boisterously cascades down to my feet,  
To the bare feet of the goddess of hair.

I, Anna Csillag, throughout thirty years,  
Have known neither sorrow nor pain;  
But, what happened to you, my son:  
You look at me and you are weeping?

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<sup>38</sup> The titles that Wittlin read in the 1920s–1930s included the 1923 edition of Sabatier's *Vie de saint François d'Assise*; Robert Saitschick, *Franziskus von Assisi* (München: C. H. Beck, 1917); Ulrich Peters, *Franz von Assisi* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1912); Gabriel Faure, *Pèlerinages d'Italie: au pays de Saint François d'Assise et de Sainte Catherine de Sienna* (Paris, Perrin, 1920); G. K. Chesterton, *Saint Francis of Assisi* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1923), and Thomas of Celano, *The Life of Saint Francis*. Wittlin, [Diaries], I: 1920s–1932, [1920s, pp. 106, 113].

As for me, Anna Csillag – even during those years  
When your brothers' blood had stained half the world,  
And printer's ink was saturated with blood,  
And death shouted at me from adjacent columns –  
Not one of my hairs turned gray,  
Not a hair of my head was lost.

O Anna Csillag, the holy newspaper image  
Of our bygone youthful days:  
I walk about the world and gather rubbish –  
Soon I'll become a relic of myself.

(And I shall write even duller verses  
À la recherche, à la recherche  
Du temps perdu.)<sup>39</sup>

The poem falls into two parts: the first four stanzas form Anna Csillag's monologue and the final two stanzas are the words uttered by another person, presumably the poet himself. While there is no direct exchange between these two voices, there nevertheless is some interaction between them, with Anna Csillag noticing that the poet is weeping at the end of the third stanza. The first part of the poem paints a vivid portrait of Anna Csillag, drawing particular attention to her external appearance. The first feature one notices about her is her 'luxuriant hair', which, when unfastened, resembles a mighty river that 'boisterously cascades' down to her 'bare feet'. She speaks of her 'angelic beauty', which is not diminished by the passing of time. Her visual description evokes the images of the long-haired Venus from Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* or the water nymph Lorelei from Heinrich Heine's poem *Die Lorelei* – the 'fairest maid' who reclines on a rock by

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<sup>39</sup> Józef Wittlin, 'À la recherche du temps perdu', in *Poezje* [Poems], pp. 118–119. The English translation is by Dorothy Meller, quoted after Yurieff, pp. 47–48. For the Polish original, see Appendix 1.

the bank of the Rhine and ‘combs her golden hair’.<sup>40</sup> In Wittlin’s poem, Anna Csillag holds in her hand a ‘spray of stars’, which she compares to a lily, a symbol of chastity and a traditional attribute of Virgin Mary. All these attributes together turn her into what Simone de Beauvoir called the myth of ‘the Eternal Feminine’ – an image of an idealised virgin goddess continually recurring in artistic and literary productions of patriarchal cultures.<sup>41</sup>

Anna Csillag, however, is much more than just yet another oppressively stifling portrayal of feminine beauty. Wittlin’s poem, I argue, employs the myth of the Eternal Feminine to develop a critique of a specific notion of sainthood that conceives the saint as an idealised and otherworldly figure. At the end of the third stanza, when another character is introduced and Anna Csillag notices his weeping, the so-far idyllic description of her beauty takes on a more sinister note. In the following stanza, Anna Csillag continues to boast of her beauty, which was not in the least affected by the horrific news of hundreds of thousands dying in the trenches. The image of their blood stands in stark contrast with Anna Csillag’s praise of her timeless beauty. Her graceful immortality, when juxtaposed with the soldiers’ brutal deaths, devalues their suffering. Her complete lack of compassion calls into question her saintly status. Thus, in the final stanzas the poem, the poet laments not only his ‘brothers’ loss of lives, but also the loss of the ideal that Anna Csillag embodied for him.

In order for his critique of the model of sainthood represented by Anna Csillag to be more effective, Wittlin very consciously chose the name for his heroine, who, as a matter of fact, in the 1880s–1930s actually populated the advertisements of a pomade for hair growth that appeared in a number of newspapers across the Austro-Hungarian Empire (see figures 11–14).

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<sup>40</sup> Heinrich Heine, ‘The Homecoming: Poem 2’, in *The Complete Poems of Heinrich Heine*, trans. by Hal Draper (Boston: Suhrkamp, 1982), pp. 76–77, ll. 9, 12.

<sup>41</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. by H. M. Parshley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp. 211–213, 282–284.

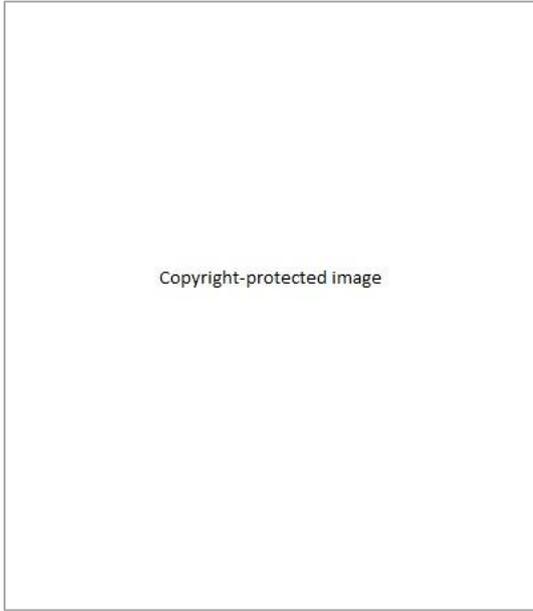


Figure 11. A German-language version of the advertisement. *Wiener Mode* [Viennese Fashion], 1 October 1901.

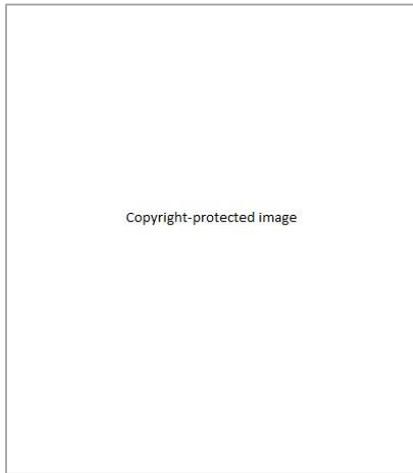


Figure 12. A Russian-language version of the advertisement. *Двинский листок* [Dvinsk Paper], no. 1093, 3 July 1910.

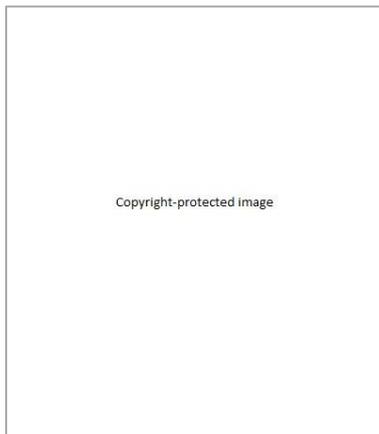


Figure 13. A Hungarian-language version of the advertisement. *Országos Hirlap* [National Telegraph], vol. 3, no. 9, 9 January 1899.

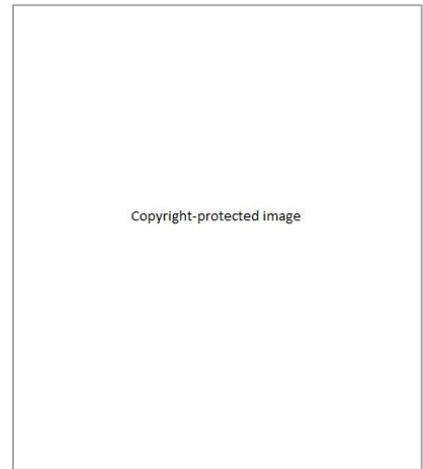


Figure 14. A Polish-language version of the advertisement. *Gazeta Kielecka* [Kielce Newspaper], vol. 33, no. 92, 19 November 1902

The advertisement, appearing in all the major languages of the empire – including German, Hungarian, Polish, Russian, and Slovenian – told the same story, narrated by Anna Csillag herself, always beginning with the words: ‘I, Anna Csillag...’. Anna Csillag’s narrative describes how, thanks to a special pomade that she invented, she managed to grow her exceptionally long (185 centimetres), ‘Lorelei-like’ hair. The text assures potential customers that the pomade can also help men grow impressive beards and moustaches, as well as improve the general health of their hair. Anna Csillag offers to send her pomade to ‘all sides of the world’ on receipt of appropriate payment. The address she gives is in Vienna, but Anna Csillag was a perfectly international figure: with a Hungarian name, Lorelei-like hair evoking both Heinrich Heine’s poem and a number of German and Slavic folk legends about water-nymphs, and a perfect command of all the imperial languages.

The ‘goddess of hair’ from Wittlin’s poem is, thus, also the patron saint of the Habsburg Empire, ‘reigning over the columns’ of numerous newspapers and spreading her message in all the corners and languages of Austro-Hungary for more than half a century. She became a timeless heroine of almost mythical identity and her impressive ever-growing coat of hair captured the imagination of many writers.<sup>42</sup> Bruno Schulz, a prominent Polish-Jewish author and painter of the inter-war period, thus reinvents her story in his novel *Sanatorium pod klepsydrą* (*Sanatorium at the Sign of the Hourglass*, 1937):

By a decree of Providence, Anna Csillag had been stricken with her meagre growth. Her whole village pitied her for this affliction. [...] And lo and behold, as a result of their fervent prayers, the curse was lifted from her head. Anna Csillag had attained the grace of enlightenment. She received signs and instructions and prepared a specific, a wondrous medicine, which restored fertility to her head. And

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<sup>42</sup> She appears, for instance, in Karl Kraus’s *Die Welt der Plakate* (*The World of Posters*, 1909), Walter Benjamin’s *Das Passagen-Werk* (*The Arcades Project*, 1927–1940), and Czesław Miłosz’s *Traktat poetycki* (*A Treatise on Poetry*, 1957). For a discussion of the literary presence of Anna Csillag, see Małgorzata Kitowska-Łysiak, ‘Ja, Anna Csillag...’ [I, Anna Csillag...], in Małgorzata Kitowska-Łysiak, *Schulzowskie Marginalia* [Schulz’s Marginalia] (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2007), pp. 47–67.

her hair began to sprout. And as if that were not enough, her husband, brothers and cousins too were felted in the following days with huge black pelts of beards. [...]. Anna Csillag had become the apostle of the hirsute. Having delighted her native town, she now wished to delight the whole world, which she invited, encouraged, and begged to accept for its salvation her divine gift, that wondrous medicine of which she alone knew the secret.<sup>43</sup>

Schulz's narrator recalls that when he first read Anna Csillag's story, he experienced a moment of illumination in which he saw her as the chosen one who holds the last piece of the revelation. What happened to her was a 'decree of Providence'; she did not act of her own accord, but followed 'signs' and 'instructions' she received. The recipe she invented was a sign of her divine appointment. The narrator becomes convinced that in her story he found the missing appendix to the Scriptures: '[t]his was the Book, its last pages, its unofficial supplement, a tradesmen's entrance full of litter and debris'.<sup>44</sup>

When in Wittlin's poem Anna Csillag becomes a saint, in Schulz's narrative she is the last apostle whose discovery of the secret of hair growth disrupts ordinary life by bringing into it something of the supernatural order. Yet Anna Csillag's sweet smile, 'ever the same' and unchangeable, in Wittlin's poem does not only refer to her supernatural agelessness, but also to the nature of the myth of the 'bygone youthful days' of which she is the 'holy [...] image'. It is the myth of the '*felix Galicia*' and the golden years of the Habsburg Empire under the rule of Franz Joseph.<sup>45</sup> Galicia, officially known as the Kingdom of Galicia and Lodomeria, was a borderland province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and one of its most ethnically, linguistically and religiously diverse areas, with

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<sup>43</sup> Bruno Schulz, *Sanatorium at the Sign of the Hourglass*, trans. by John Curran Davis <<http://www.schulzian.net/translation/sanatorium.htm>> [accessed 1 July 2014], pp. 7–8. I quote from this recent translation because I find it more accurate than the older translation by Celina Wieniewska (Bruno Schulz, *Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass*, trans. by Celina Wieniewska (London: Hamilton, 1979).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>45</sup> I owe the term '*felix Galicia*' to Luiza Bialasiewicz, who uses it in her paper 'Another Europe: Remembering Habsburg Galicia', *Cultural Geographies*, 10.1 (2003), 21–44. On the myth of Galicia, see also Larry Wolff, *The Idea of Galicia: History and Fantasy in Habsburg Political Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); and *Galicia: A Multicultural Land*, ed. by Chris Hann and Paul Robert Magosci (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

Poles, Ukrainians, Ruthenians, Germans, and Jews living together in relative harmony until the outbreak of World War I (see Appendix 2, map 2).<sup>46</sup> While formally the area belonged to the Habsburg Empire, it was granted partial independence with regard to local self-governance. The empire's peoples were free to cultivate their cultures, speak their own languages, and practise their religions.<sup>47</sup> Thus, towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Habsburg Empire turned into a 'supranational [...] *oikumene* that strove to transcend the nation both as an exclusive territorial ideal and the exclusive claimant of identity'.<sup>48</sup> What bound the people of the Habsburg Empire together was shared institutions and loyalty towards the emperor.<sup>49</sup> The 'gentle' rule of Franz Joseph over the multi-ethnic empire won him widespread sympathy and loyalty among Galicians. His name became an integral part of the myth of *felix* Galicia – 'an ideal beyond time and beyond history', the most blissful province of the empire that was 'the rightful heir of the spirit of the Holy Roman empire, both embodying the universalism of European culture and playing the role of mediator between East and West'.<sup>50</sup> An important part of the myth

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<sup>46</sup> On the history of the multi-ethnic identity of Galicia, see John-Paul Himka, 'Dimensions of a Triangle: Polish-Ukrainian-Jewish Relations in Austrian Galicia', *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, 12 (1999), 25–48; Luiza Bialasiewicz and John O'Loughlin, 'Re-Ordering Europe's Eastern Frontier: Galician Identities and Political Cartographies on the Polish-Ukrainian Border', in *Boundaries and Place: European Borderlands in Geographical Context*, ed. by David Kaplan and Jouni Häkli (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), pp. 217–238.

<sup>47</sup> As Bialasiewicz points out, while Poles living under the Prussian and Russian rule had to demonstrate a lot of strength to resist the imposed policies of Germanisation and Russification aimed at erasing their ethnocultural identity, 'the Habsburg vision provided an alternative vision of governance and community' that defied the idea that belonging needs to be rooted in national identity. People living in Galicia, thus, would be by default bi- or trilingual – able to communicate in Polish, German, Ukrainian, and Yiddish – and would define their identity through a sense of belonging to their local homeland. The imperial identity, Bialasiewicz asserts, allowed for the co-existence of diverse ethnicities, languages, and religions because it was essentially 'porous' and 'pluralistic'. Bialasiewicz, 'Another Europe', pp. 25, 48.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>49</sup> The imperial identity, as Bialasiewicz observes, 'demanded only partial allegiance, and never strove to impose the bounded and historicized homogeneity of national belonging'. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25. Bialasiewicz draws attention to the recent revival of interest in the history of Galicia and its multicultural heritage. She notes that '[o]ver the past decade, the Habsburg legacy has been rediscovered in a number of post-communist contexts. Just in the preceding five years, in cities such as Budapest, Kraków, Ljubljana and Prague, a revalorization of the imperial heritage has been the focus of numerous interventions into these cities' urban landscapes [...]. Indeed, a great number of the collaborative initiatives born in Eastern and Central Europe after 1989 (such as the Visegrad group or the Central European Initiative) have drawn their inspiration precisely within its memory' (p. 23). This revival of interest in the history of Galicia is also reflected in contemporary East-Central European literatures; see, for instance, Andrzej Stasiuk, *Opowieści galicyjskie* (Kraków: Znak, 1995), published

consisted in an ideal of perfect harmony and stability of which the emperor was a protector.<sup>51</sup> The faith in the security that the multi-ethnic and tolerant Habsburg Empire guaranteed was further sustained by the rich cultural life of the *fin-de-siècle* Vienna that welcomed artists, musicians and writers of all the provinces and languages. As Zweig remarks in *Die Welt von Gestern (The World of Yesterday)*:

In hardly any other European city was the urge towards culture as passionate as in Vienna. For the very reason that for centuries Austria and its monarchy had been neither politically ambitious nor particularly successful in its military ventures, native pride had focused most strongly on distinction in artistic achievement. [...] Gluck, Haydn and Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms and Johann Strauss, all the currents of European culture had merged in this place. At court and among the nobility and the common people alike, German elements were linked with Slavonic, Hungarian, Spanish, Italian, French and Flemish. [...] Open-minded and particularly receptive, the city attracted the most disparate of forces, relaxed their tensions, eased and placated them. It was pleasant to live here, in this atmosphere of intellectual tolerance, and unconsciously every citizen of Vienna also became a supranational, cosmopolitan citizen of the world.<sup>52</sup>

Anna Csillag from Wittlin's poem is a patron saint of this harmonious co-existence of diverse peoples in a stable and permanent world of the Empire. She is both cosmopolitan – though based in Vienna, she repeats her story in all the languages of the Empire to make

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in English as *Tales of Galicia*, trans. by Margarita Nafpaktitis (Prague: Twisted Spoon, 2003); and Martin Pollack, *Nach Galizien: Eine Reise durch die verschwundene Welt Ostgaliziens und der Bukowina* [Through Galicia: A Journey to the Vanished World of East Galicia and Bukovina], 2nd edn (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 2001).

<sup>51</sup> As Stefan Zweig wrote in *Die Welt von Gestern (The World of Yesterday)*: 'Everything in our Austrian Monarchy, then almost a thousand years old, seemed built to last, and the state itself was the ultimate guarantor of durability. [...] Our currency, the Austrian crown, circulated in the form of shiny gold coins, thus vouching for its own immutability. [...] Everything in this wide domain was firmly established, immovably in its place, with the old Emperor at the top of the pyramid, and if he were to die the Austrians all knew (or thought they knew) that another emperor would take his place, and nothing in the well-calculated order of things would change. Anything radical or violent seemed impossible in such an age of reason.' *The World of Yesterday*, trans. by Anthea Bell (London: Pushkin Press, 2009), pp. 23–24.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34. Other contemporary works that explore the myth of the Habsburg Empire include in Robert Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften (The Man without Qualities)*, Karl Kraus's *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit (The Last Days of Mankind)*, Stefan Zweig's *Die Welt von Gestern (The World of Yesterday)*, and Bruno Schulz's *Sklepy cynamonowe (Cinnamon Shops)*.

sure that it reaches all its peoples – and local – over her ornamental dress she wears an apron, a standard domestic garment. For over half a century she has repeated her story without any alterations, turning it into as permanent and timeless a piece of narrative as the myth of the Empire itself. Her story also chimes well with the widespread positive belief in progress and stability. Anna Csillag proves that even minor ills, such as meagre hair growth, can be solved with appropriate formulas. She is willing to share hers with other imperial subjects to make their lives even happier. She is the ‘goddess of hair’, but also of the Empire, becoming a complementary female figure to Franz Joseph, a paternalistic ‘emperor by divine grace’.<sup>53</sup> As Christiane Wolf observes, in the last years of Franz Joseph’s reign, his image as the father of his peoples acquired a specifically religious meaning and assumed ‘an almost mythic role’ that reflected ‘a great desire for an integrating symbol which could provide stability and continuity within the Habsburg Monarchy’.<sup>54</sup> Thus, on the eve of the imminent war, both Anna Csillag and Franz Joseph occupied a region of spatio-temporal liminality located somewhere between the historical, the mythical, and the religious.

Wittlin’s novel *Salt of the Earth* explores the abrupt end to which this myth came with the outbreak of World War I. The novel’s critical evaluation of the mythical image of Franz Joseph corresponds to the poem’s critique of Anna Csillag’s sainthood. The main protagonist of *Salt of the Earth*, Piotr Niewiadomski, is a simple Hutsul peasant from Eastern Galicia, who on the onset of the war is drafted into the Habsburg Army. Piotr can be considered an archetype of a Galician villager who defines his complex identity through his languages, religious practice, and loyalty towards the Emperor. He is:

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<sup>53</sup> Karen Owens, *Franz Joseph and Elisabeth: The Last Great Monarchs of Austria-Hungary* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2014), p. 157.

<sup>54</sup> Christiane Wolf, ‘Representing Constitutional Monarchy in Britain, Germany, and Austria’, in *The Limits of Loyalty: Imperial Symbolism, Popular Allegiances, and State Patriotism in the Late Habsburg Monarchy*, ed. by Laurence Cole and Daniel L. Unowsky (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007), pp. 199–222 (p. 213).

a Ruthenian himself, though his father had been a Pole. The issue in such cases was decided by a man's religion. But consciousness of his nationality had never been Peter's strong point. Indeed, if one may say so, Peter had never got beyond the threshold of national consciousness. He spoke Polish and Ukrainian; he believed in God in accordance with the Greek Catholic dogma; he served the Austro-Hungarian Emperor.<sup>55</sup>

And yet, despite the 'great affection' that Piotr has for the emperor, when he undergoes a military training in the barracks in Hungary and becomes caught up in the gigantic and cruel machine of war, he begins to feel betrayed by the emperor.<sup>56</sup> He naïvely imagines that the emperor's role over the centuries has been to protect his peoples just like a father would protect his children. At present, however, Franz Joseph began acting like a diabolical demiurge who is intent on performing a new act of creation that will turn his diverse peoples into an army of identical and obedient subjects:

And as God created man in His likeness, so the Emperor presented men with a uniform, to give them some sort of likeness to himself. [...] Soon these peasants, mountaineers, shepherds, peddlers, of whom the draft was made up, were transformed into soldiers. The hard lines dividing man from man suddenly disappeared. Huzuls were no longer Huzuls, Jews no longer Jews; and the old looked younger in this Imperial disguise. [...] In the souls, also, a deep upheaval took place. They were no longer themselves.<sup>57</sup>

In Wittlin's novel the myth of the Habsburg Empire comes to an end not with the end of the war and the re-drawing of the map of Europe, but in the very moment when it fails its people, robbing them of their diverse identities. Franz Joseph metonymically strips them of all individuality by cladding them in his imperial uniforms, and puts their lives in mortal danger for the sake of his political and economic ambitions. The myth becomes discredited

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<sup>55</sup> Józef Wittlin, *Salt of the Earth*, trans. by Pauline de Chary (New York: Sheridan House, 1941), p. 156.

<sup>56</sup> On this topic, see also Leonid Heretz, 'The Great War and the Disintegration of the Traditional Peasant Worldview in Józef Wittlin's *Salt of the Earth*', in *Between Lvov, New York, and Ulysses' Ithaca*, pp. 41–46.

<sup>57</sup> Wittlin, *Salt of the Earth*, pp. 295–296, 301–302.

when both Franz Joseph and Anna Csillag prove able to engage with ‘neither sorrow nor pain’ of the peoples whom they have in a symbolic way united into one multi-ethnic imperial body. Franz Joseph turns out to be too politically-minded to protect the harmonious well-being of his subjects, and Anna Csillag continues her blissful existence in the world of newspapers, distant and unconcerned about the fate of those with whom she was so eager to share her revelation:

As for me, Anna Csillag – even during those years  
When your brothers’ blood had stained half the world,  
And printer’s ink was saturated with blood,  
And death shouted at me from adjacent columns –  
Not one of my hairs turned gray,  
Not a hair of my head was lost. (14–19)

While Piotr’s rite of passage, marking his transition into an imperial soldier, involves having his lengthy hair shaved off, unconcerned Anna Csillag throughout the war proudly proclaims the permanence of her 185-centimetre-long tresses. They refuse to even change their colour in empathy with the perishing soldiers. This lack of compassion with those who have suffered during the war, often drafted against their will and without understanding the cause for which they were to fight and die, in Wittlin’s view brings into disrepute the myth of the timeless empire with its benevolent, godlike Emperor and its beautiful, ageless patron saint, Anna Csillag. Hence, she and the mythical harmony of the supra-national, multi-ethnic empire become the image of the ‘bygone youthful days’. She and Franz Joseph fail to acknowledge the horror, suffering, and death that became the imperial peoples’ everyday experience. These experiences remain outside of the mythical framework, and their intensity ultimately shatters it.

What remains, as the words uttered by the speaker in the last two stanzas of the poem assert, is the ‘rubbish’ that poets can ‘gather’ and use in their creative work, engaging in a Proustian act of remembering the things past. This metapoetic image of an

artist who collects broken fragments of the old world and its myths in order to re-establish a connection with the past and recover lost traditions appears frequently in post-World War I literature. Walter Benjamin imagines the writer to be a ‘ragpicker’ who engages in a poetic act of ‘picking up rags of speech and verbal scraps with his stick and tossing them, grumbling and growling, a little drunk, into his cart, not without letting one or another of those faded cotton remnants – “humanity”, “inwardness”, or “absorption” – flutter derisively in the wind’.<sup>58</sup> Eliot, in the final verses of *The Waste Land*, creates a similar image: ‘These fragments I have shored against my ruins’, pronounces one of the poem’s many voices or, perhaps, the poet himself.<sup>59</sup> All these images portray the poetic activity as a quasi-archaeological undertaking through which scattered fragments of the past, Eliot’s ‘heap of broken images’, can be revived and given meaning again.<sup>60</sup> Wittlin’s poem, however, critically responds to this concept, pointing to the fact that such rubbish-collecting may easily turn into a nostalgic fixation on the past that distracts the poet’s attention away from the present and future; ‘Soon I’ll become a relic of myself’, confesses Wittlin’s speaker. Wittlin’s response was certainly shaped by his knowledge that a return to the Galicia of the past embodied by Anna Csillag, even for those who survived the war, was not possible. After the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire and the redrawing of the map of Europe, the multi-ethnic, polylinguistic province of Galicia practically ceased to exist.<sup>61</sup> Anna Csillag and her model of sainthood remained as distant and detached from

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<sup>58</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘An Outsider Makes His Mark’, in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, 4 vols (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1999), II: 1927–1934, trans. by Rodney Livingstone and others, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, pp. 305–311 (p. 310).

<sup>59</sup> Eliot, ‘The Waste Land’, l. 431.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 22.

<sup>61</sup> As Bialasiewicz explains: ‘Although the Austro-Hungarian empire expired on the eastern front of the First World War, the violent national struggles and the subsequent national repartitioning of the Habsburg lands did not succeed in fully ‘purifying’ the East Central European spaces – and certainly not those of Galicja. That task was to be accomplished first by Nazi Germany – and completed by postwar planners. By 1945, the Final Solution had eliminated 5.4 million Eastern and Central European Jews – erasing all traces of the vibrant Ashkenazi communities in Galicja and the Pale. Another 9–10 million people – Roma, Poles, Ukrainians, Byelorussians and Russians – were killed in the Nazi sweep through these territories.’ Bialasiewicz, ‘Another Europe’, p. 33.

the concerns of modernity as Franz Joseph's imperial ideal. For Wittlin, she remained a saint of childhood memories and 'youthful days'. However, remembering her and, thus, turning into a 'relic' of oneself, was clearly not what, as his later writing reveals, Wittlin thought was needed in the war-stricken world.

### **Saint Francis of Assisi: The Modern Saint**

Searching for an alternative to the Habsburg myth, Wittlin first turned to pacifism, and tried to conceive of war as an act of violence imposed on peacefully-minded peoples by their distant and politically-blind governing bodies. However, he soon distanced himself from what he considered pacifism's naivety. He could no longer embrace it after the experience of the Polish-Ukrainian War of 1918–1919, which found him in Lwów, at the very centre of the fights.<sup>62</sup> The violence taking place in the streets of Lwów, he later wrote, was accompanied by 'battles [...] raging in [his] conscience'.<sup>63</sup> His loyalties were divided, and he could not find a way to reconcile them. As he later recounted in his essay 'Ze wspomnień byłego pacyfisty' (Confessions of an Ex-Pacifist), writing poetry became for him the only way to preserve his sanity:

In those memorable days of November 1918, like all the people of Lwów, we had to face a categorical question: should Lwów be Polish or Ukrainian? There was no third alternative, and you could already hear shots in the streets. My late friend Jan Stur and I – both pacifists – replied without hesitation: Polish. So we should have

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<sup>62</sup> On the Polish-Ukrainian War and the Jewish pogrom in Lwów, see Mick, 'War and Conflicting Memories'; and Hagen, 'The Moral Economy of Popular Violence'. On Jewish pogroms in Galicia, see Alexander V. Prusin, 'A "Zone Of Violence": The Anti-Jewish Pogroms in Eastern Galicia in 1914–1915 and 1941', in *Shatterzone of Empires: Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman Borderlands*, ed. by Omer Bartov and Eric D. Weitz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), pp. 362–377.

<sup>63</sup> Józef Wittlin, 'Ze wspomnień byłego pacyfisty' [Confessions of an Ex-Pacifist], in *Orfeusz w piekle XX wieku* [Orpheus in the Inferno of the Twentieth Century], pp. 73–91 (p. 77), (first publ. in *Wiadomości literackie* [Literary News], 5 January 1930, pp. 1–2).

supported the war that was already taking place. We did not. Our sentimental patriotism was in too serious conflict with our pacifism. We should have established a hierarchy of values. It did not work out. There was an absolute balance in our conflicted feelings: we could neither resign from our attachment to Polish Lwów for the sake of our pacifism, nor subordinate our pacifism to our Polish identity. In the end we fell victims to a tragic dissonance, the only escape from which was poetry. As for me, I could not accept either reality. [...] After several months of heavy fighting, only poetry could save me from despair. [...] How idyllic in its simplicity seemed to me then the monstrous world war, during which I could keep my conscience pure and take a firm stance. The Polish-Ukrainian War and the Jewish pogrom in Lwów, in contrast, forced on me tragic dilemmas that I could not resolve either in my conscience or in my reason.<sup>64</sup>

In his further reflections on World War I, Wittlin expresses his disappointment at the role Christian churches played in the conflict.<sup>65</sup> In his view, the fact that during the war religions sided with different armies, priests accepted military titles, and religious language was ever-present in the discourse of political propaganda put Christianity to shame.<sup>66</sup> As he writes, the alliance of religion and politics was flawed from the beginning because while people were busy ‘rendering unto Caesar what belonged to Caesar, what belonged to God was not rendered unto God’.<sup>67</sup>

Wittlin’s disillusionment with the role Christian religion played in the war led him to a search for a new, radical model of Christian sainthood. A model that would be capable of entering a dialogue with modernity and whose nature would make it impossible to use it instrumentally as a propaganda tool. After the war was over, Wittlin became increasingly attracted to Franciscan spirituality, and was even considering entering the Franciscan

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., pp. 77–78.

<sup>65</sup> For a discussion of how different religious denominations were implicated in the war, see Philip Jenkins, *The Great and Holy War: How World War I Became a Religious Crusade* (New York: HarperOne, 2014). See also chapter 1, section 5: ‘War and Religion: Reimagining the Real’.

<sup>66</sup> Wittlin, ‘Wojna, pokój i dusza poety’ [War, Peace, and the Poet’s Soul], in *Orfeusz w piekle XX wieku* [Orpheus in the Inferno of the Twentieth Century], pp. 16–44 (pp. 19–21).

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

Order.<sup>68</sup> This did not happen, as the following year he met the educationalist Halina Handelsman, whom he married in 1924. However, throughout the 1920s Wittlin continued to study different biographies of Francis of Assisi, including Sabatier's work. Twice, in 1925 and 1926, he travelled to Assisi, which he came to call a *terra mystica*.<sup>69</sup> Eventually, on his baptism in 1953, he took the names of Franciszek Maria (Francis Mary).<sup>70</sup> Wittlin's interest in Francis of Assisi was not accidental. The early twentieth century saw a great revival of interest in Franciscan studies and spirituality, which reached its climax in the events and publications that commemorated the seventh centenary of Francis's death in 1926.<sup>71</sup> The wide appeal that Francis enjoyed in the period can be attributed partly to the way in which he was portrayed in a number of contemporary hagiographies – as an inspired outcast, a social reformer, and a severe critic of institutionalised religion, and

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<sup>68</sup> In a 1921 letter to the literary critic and translator Kazimiera Żuławska, Wittlin wrote: 'I'm thinking whether, after I finish translating the *Odyssey* and writing a couple of shorter pieces, I ought to get baptised and enter the Franciscan Order. [...] I feel I could make a real change in the world, not by means of books, but a living word.' 'Letter to Kazimiera Żuławska, 1 May 1921', in Józef Wittlin, *Listy* [Letters], ed. by Tadeusz Januszewski (Warszawa: Niezależna Oficyna Wydawnicza, 1996), pp. 22–23.

<sup>69</sup> Wittlin published his travel narratives interspersed with spiritual reflections as a series of essays that first came out in different literary magazines in 1926–1927, and were later collected in *Orfeusz w piekle XX wieku* [Orpheus in the Inferno of the Twentieth Century], pp. 173–191.

<sup>70</sup> Józef Wittlin, 'Letter to Roman Brandstaetter, 30 December 1959', quoted in Ryszard Zajączkowski, 'Korespondencja między Józefem Wittlinem i Romanem Brandstaetterem' [Correspondence between Józef Wittlin and Roman Brandstaetter], *Tematy i konteksty* [Subjects and Contexts], 2.7 (2012), 151–173 (p. 160).

<sup>71</sup> One example of a contemporary religious revival inspired by Franciscan spirituality was the foundation of the Mariavite Church in Poland. Initially, the Mariavite movement led by Feliksa (also known as Maria Franciszka) Kozłowska aimed to bring about a reform of the Roman Catholic clergy in Poland. They advocated a return to the ascetic Franciscan tradition and a radical renunciation of property. After they came into conflict with bishops and, eventually, with the Vatican, their movement was condemned by Pope Pius X in the encyclical *Tribus Circiter* (1906), and their leaders excommunicated. They maintained contact with a number of Italian Modernist theologians. Their excommunication led to a schism and resulted in the foundation of the Mariavite Church, which adopted a large part of Roman Catholic theology, introducing a few important changes, including the priesthood of women. The scholarship on the Mariavites available in English is scarce; for a general discussion, see Jerzy Peterkiewicz, *The Third Adam* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975); and Łukasz Liniewicz, *Mariavitism: Mystical, Social, National: A Polish Religious Answer to the Challenges of Modernity* (unpublished master's thesis, University of Tilburg, 2012/2013) <<http://dstp.rel.pl/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Mariavites.pdf>> [accessed 12 February 2014]. On the 1926 commemorations of Francis, see A. G. Little, 'The Seventh Centenary of St. Francis of Assisi (1226–1926)', in *Franciscan Essays II*, ed. by F. C. Burkitt, H. E. Goad and A. G. Little (Manchester: University Press, 1932), pp. 1–17.

partly to the discovery of new archival material on which some of these works were based.<sup>72</sup>

In the introduction to the biography of Francis that Wittlin began writing in the mid-1920s, similarly to Sabatier, he vows to ‘take off the burning halo’ from Francis’s head, stating: ‘its glow blinds me and prevents me from looking directly into the face that I wish to portray’.<sup>73</sup> He asserts that his biography is not meant to be a book about ‘a hero who passed away’, adding that when he looks into Francis’s face, his eyes reflect the ‘living substance of the world’.<sup>74</sup> In his narrative, Wittlin follows in the steps of Sabatier, focusing less on the miraculous events in Francis’s life and more on the contemporary relevance of his teaching. One of the aspects of Francis’s life that he particularly emphasises is Francis’s experience of warfare. In 1202, when Francis was twenty years old – just like Wittlin when he volunteered for the Austro-Hungarian Army – he took part in the war between Assisi and Perugia. The final scene of the battle, as depicted by Wittlin, becomes the beginning of Francis’s in-depth reflection on faith and, eventually, his conversion:

Francis can hear the wail of the wounded, he can smell the odour of chopped flesh.  
He is exhausted. The sun sets.  
‘God is with us!’ yells Assisi.

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<sup>72</sup> The most important contemporary discovery was the manuscript of *Speculum Perfectionis* (*The Mirror of Perfection*) allegedly written by Brother Leo. It was published by Sabatier in 1898, and soon became subject of heated debates. Sabatier claimed that it belonged to the oldest existing documents providing insight into Francis’s life and teaching, since it was dated 1227–1228. However, other scholars undermined his stance, proving that the copyist must have made a mistake, and the documents were most probably not older than 1318. At present scholars agree that the volume was composed in the fourteenth century, and its author was probably a disciple of Brother Leo.

<sup>73</sup> Wittlin published the introduction and first four chapters of his book, which he called a ‘literary monograph’, in the journals and magazines *Skamander* [Scamander], 7.49 (1927), 19–35; *Głos Prawdy* [The Voice of Truth], 105 (1927); *Prądy* [Currents], 2 (1931), 42–46; *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* [Illustrated Weekly], 25–28 (1932); and *Kultura* [Culture], 7 (1932). They were subsequently reprinted as ‘Święty Franciszek z Asyżu’ [Saint Francis of Assisi], in Józef Wittlin, *Pisma pośmiertne i inne eseje* [Posthumous Writings and Other Essays], ed. by Jan Zieliński (Warszawa: Biblioteka Więzi, 1991), pp. 55–101; and Józef Wittlin, *Święty Franciszek z Asyżu* [Saint Francis of Assisi] (Warszawa: Biblioteka Więzi, 1997). All subsequent quotations are from *Pisma pośmiertne i inne eseje*. The sentence quoted is from page 55.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

‘God is with us!’ yells Perugia.

‘Actually, with whom is God?’ thinks Francis. He turns his head and tries to spot God. But he can only see people, living and dead. Living and dead horses.

At this moment, he was taken hostage.<sup>75</sup>

In Wittlin’s narrative, the harrowing experience of the war makes Francis suspicious of a totalising approach to God and military rhetoric that uses religion for propaganda purposes. Seeing dying humans and animals whose lost lives are the great price of the war, Francis develops deep empathy for those who suffer and shows much empathy for the fellow hostages with whom he shares his prison cell. The year he spends in prison proves to be of formative value. He becomes more affectionate and sensitive to others. On his return to Assisi, he is more attentive to people’s needs and, trying to find answers to fundamental questions concerning social justice, marginalisation, oppression and suffering, he gradually finds his way to God. After his conversion, when he renounced his father’s fortune and started preaching to the people of Assisi, they, Wittlin remarks, ‘for the first time saw a man, who with his own being illuminates the pages of the Gospel.’<sup>76</sup>

Though Wittlin never finished his biography of Francis – its manuscript burnt in World War II in the Nazi invasion of Warsaw – the image of the saint that emerges from the chapters that he completed is that of a man who, in Wittlin’s words, can be regarded both as ‘great social reformer’ and ‘an inspired poet’.<sup>77</sup> He is fascinated with troubadour poetry, sensitive to social injustice, and eager to work towards alleviating the suffering of those who are marginalised and rejected by society. Such a rendering of Francis’s life, I suggest, can well be read as Wittlin’s response to the bleak post-war life. By the mid-1920s, he became increasingly disillusioned with the political and ideological landscape of post-war Europe. The newly acquired Polish independence did not translate into a

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 57–58.

peaceful vision of the future with which, as he reminisces, soldiers were fed during the war. As Norman Davies observes, the ‘rebirth of Poland seemed to many Jews to herald the crossing of Jordan [...] an end of the chronic insecurity which had prevailed for almost half a century’.<sup>78</sup> However, the reality proved to be much more disheartening.

Wittlin’s poetry of the 1920s–1940s is very much informed by its immediate historico-political context. During the inter-war period, the former peaceful borderland provinces turned into areas replete with nationalist tensions. One of the four major parties on the Polish political scene, the right-wing *Narodowa Demokracja* (National Democracy) led by Roman Dmowski, was set on turning the newly independent country from a multi-ethnic state (in the inter-war period one third of Poland’s population consisted of Ukrainian, Belarussian, Jewish, and German minorities) into an ethnically-, linguistically-, and religiously-homogenous nation-state.<sup>79</sup> As the Great Depression of the 1930s set in, nationalism and anti-Semitism began to rise. Wittlin, as a public literary figure, was directly affected by this situation, and he addressed it in the poem ‘Saint Francis and the Poor Jews’, written in 1932.

What Wittlin found particularly distressing about the anti-Semitism he experienced in Poland (and what he frequently returned to in his journal) was that many of its propagators were closely associated with the Catholic Church to which he felt increasingly drawn. Indeed, Dmowski’s vision of a homogenous nation-state began to appeal to a number of Catholic priests and intellectuals, especially those who considered

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<sup>78</sup> Norman Davies, p. 189.

<sup>79</sup> Dmowski and his party never gained official political power, but they strongly opposed the First Marshal Józef Piłsudski’s vision of a multinational federation, and openly endorsed anti-minority and anti-Semitic agenda, arguing for the Polonisation of ethnic minorities. This, as Brian Porter-Szűcs observes, was unprecedented in the history of Poland, which since the seventeenth century was a multi-ethnic and multi-denominational country, with the largest Jewish population in Europe at the time. Brian Porter-Szűcs, *Faith and Fatherland: Catholicism, Modernity, and Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 328–359. See also Aviel Roshwald, *Ethnic Nationalism and the Fall of Empires: Central Europe, the Middle East and Russia, 1914–1923* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 157–171. On Dmowski’s political worldview, see Andreas Kossert, ‘Founding Father of Modern Poland and Nationalistic Antisemite: Roman Dmowski’, in *In the Shadow of Hitler: Personalities of the Right in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. by Rebecca Haynes and Martyn Rady (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), pp. 89–104.

themselves staunch anti-Modernists. When the Roman Catholic authorities struggled to defuse the Modernist crisis between the 1900s–1920s, the discourse of the ‘enemy inside’ began to hold sway in the official Catholic rhetoric. By the late 1920s, however, it would not only be Modernists who were accused of disguised attempts to destroy Christianity, but also Freemasons, Communists, and Jews – all considered destructive forces of modernity.<sup>80</sup> The perceived necessity to resist the Jewish-Masonic-Communist conspiracy was obviously in conflict with the Christian command to love one’s neighbour, which, as Brian Porter-Szűcs observes, remained one of the ‘profound gaps’ that can be identified between Polish Catholic anti-Semitism and the ‘secular teachings of racist antisemitism’ in Nazi Germany.<sup>81</sup> It often led, Porter-Szűcs adds, to serious ‘moments of cognitive dissonance’.<sup>82</sup> The Manichean rhetoric developed during the campaign against Catholic Modernists, Porter-Szűcs contends, fit anti-Semitic discourse well. In fact, a

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<sup>80</sup> In the 1930s, the most extreme Catholic anti-Semites would embrace conspiracy theories according to which the Zionists’ explicit claim that they planned to establish a Jewish state in Palestine was only a cover-up for their plot to colonise Poland. Catholic anti-Semites would be careful not to suggest any solutions to the ‘Jewish question’ that would incite violence and, thus, blatantly contradict the Christian doctrine. They would insist that only ‘honourable weapons’ may be used in a struggle with Jews, though they would not go as far as to define in what exactly these ‘weapons’ consisted. Porter-Szűcs, pp. 302–303.

<sup>81</sup> Having analysed a number of articles in the Catholic inter-war press, Porter-Szűcs observes that ‘[t]here was a pattern to the anti-Semitic tirades in the Catholic press: they would begin with a vehement depiction of the Jewish menace, then proceed to a call for Poles to “support their own,” then end by imagining an almost magical (or perhaps Providential) disappearance of the Jews. [...] At this point of logical disjuncture stood the commandment to love one’s enemy. Catholics in inter-war Poland found it nearly impossible to reconcile this teaching with their desire to get rid of the Jews, and the result was a conspicuous silence when it came to discussing how this goal might be attained.’ *Ibid.*, pp. 305–306. See also, Brian Porter[-Szűcs], ‘Anti-Semitism and the Search for a Catholic Modernity’, in *Antisemitism and Its Opponents in Modern Poland*, pp. 103–123.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 302. Such cognitive dissonance forced some of the nationalist Catholics to face a hard choice between their anti-Semitism and Catholicism during World War II, when the Nazi army began systematic extermination of Jews. A good example of what such choices could amount to is Zofia Kossak-Szczucka’s case. Before World War II, she was a nationalist author known for her anti-Semitic views. After the Nazi invasion of Poland, however, she became a co-founder of the Polish Council to Aid Jews (*Rada Pomocy Żydom*, also known as *Żegota*) – an underground organisation established to rescue Jews from Nazi-occupied Poland. In 1943, Kossak-Szczucka was arrested, imprisoned, and sent to Auschwitz. Thanks to the efforts of her friends from the resistance movement, she was released in 1944. Until the end of the war, she remained an active member of *Żegota*. In 1985, she was posthumously awarded the ‘Righteous among the Nations’ title bestowed by Yad Vashem upon non-Jews who risked their own lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. See Carla Tonini, *Czas nienawiści i czas troski: Zofia Kossak-Szczucka, antysemitka, która ratowała Żydów* [The Time of Hatred and the Time of Compassion: Zofia Kossak-Szczucka, the Anti-Semite who Saved Jews] (Warszawa: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 2007).

number of thinkers across Europe who in the 1900s–1910s took a strictly anti-Modernist stance, in the 1920s–1930s would in a similar way endorse anti-Semitic rhetoric. Thus, in 1921, Jacques Maritain (notwithstanding the fact that his wife Raïssa was a Russian-born Jew) argued for the ‘necessity’ for Christians to ‘struggle for civic health against the secret judaeo-masonic societies and against cosmopolitan finance’.<sup>83</sup> Similarly, in 1933, T. S. Eliot infamously stated that ‘where two or more cultures exist in the same place they are likely to be fiercely self-conscious or both to become adulterate. [...] reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable’.<sup>84</sup> The construction of the Jew as a potentially subversive member of society who threatens its Christian character paralleled the way in which Modernist theologians were portrayed in anti-Modernist texts of the previous decades.<sup>85</sup>

Wittlin personally experienced the damaging effects of this discourse, as it was by no means limited to politics or religion; it pervaded the intellectual, cultural, and literary life of inter-war Poland, ruining the careers of a number of Polish-Jewish writers and artists.<sup>86</sup> The value of the centuries of Jewish presence in Polish culture was undermined

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<sup>83</sup> Jacques Maritain, ‘À propos de la question juive’ [On the Jewish Question], *La Vie spirituelle* [The Spiritual Life], 2.4 (July 1921), quoted in Robert A. Ventresca, ‘Jacques Maritain and the Jewish Question: Theology, Identity and Politics’, *Studies in Christian–Jewish Relations*, 2.2 (2007), 58–69 (p. 63). In the 1910s and early 1920s, Maritain was considered ‘the official philosopher of Action Française’, a far-right nationalist movement led by Charles Maurras (Bernardi, p. 209). After the movement was condemned by the Vatican in 1926, Maritain dissociated himself from it, and in the 1930s became a staunch opponent of anti-Semitism. See also *Jacques Maritain and the Jews*, ed. by Robert Royal (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994); and Richard Francis Crane, *Passion of Israel: Jacques Maritain, Catholic Conscience, and the Holocaust* (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 2010).

<sup>84</sup> T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods*, pp. 19–20. On the question of Eliot and anti-Semitism, see papers by Ronald Schuchard, David Bromwich, Ronald Bush, Denis Donoghue, Anthony Julius, James Longenbach, and Marjorie Perloff published as part of the ongoing debate in *Modernism/Modernity*, 10.1 (2003), pp. 1–70; Ricks, pp. 40–54; Harding, *The Criterion*, pp. 143–158; and Bryan Cheyette, ‘Eliot and “Race”: Jews, Irish, and Blacks’, in *A Companion to T. S. Eliot*, pp. 335–349. For a discussion of Eliot’s engagement with Charles Maurras, see Kenneth Asher, ‘T. S. Eliot and Charles Maurras’, *ANQ*, 11.3 (1998), 20–29; and by the same author *T. S. Eliot and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), esp. chapter 1: ‘Historical Background’, pp. 11–34.

<sup>85</sup> See chapter 1, section 3: ‘The “New Wine” of Modernism and the “Old Scholastic Bottles”’.

<sup>86</sup> The term ‘Polish-Jewish writers’ embraces both the authors who had Jewish roots but considered themselves Polish and chose to write in Polish, emphasising their links with Polish culture and literary tradition, for instance Wittlin, Julian Tuwim, Antoni Słonimski, Aleksander Wat, Bruno Schulz, and Bolesław Leśmian, and those authors who felt Jewish and chose to address specifically Jewish topics, using the Polish language as a means of expression, for example Władysław Szlengel, Maurycy Szymel and Hersz Avrohom Fenster. There were frequent arguments between the two groups, the former

or indeed regarded a big mistake. Dmowski argued that Jews threatened Poland not only economically, depriving hard-working Poles of employment, but also culturally, threatening to undermine what he considered Polish values. ‘The ranks of Poles of Jewish descent increased enormously,’ he wrote in 1909, ‘but these Poles were ever more superficial [...] with a separate spirit, a separate attitude toward life and its mysteries.’<sup>87</sup> In the 1920s and 1930s, Wittlin closely collaborated with the literary review *Wiadomości Literackie* (Literary News), whose editors and regular contributors included a number of assimilated Polish Jews. In the 1930s, the review came under continuous attack from both the right-wing Polish nationalists and the Zionist Jews for its promotion of socialist ideology and a universalist understanding of Polish and European culture.<sup>88</sup> Exasperated by these attacks, Wittlin decided to leave for France in July 1939. Later, he ironically remarked that it was Polish anti-Semites who saved his life by forcing him to flee the country two months before it was invaded by the Nazi troops.<sup>89</sup>

When in the 1930s Wittlin was considering getting baptised in the Roman Catholic Church, he very consciously chose to postpone it until the current persecutions of Jews ceased. In 1940, he noted in his journal: ‘If I got baptised – I assure both Jews and Poles – the reason would not be to cease being a Jew.’<sup>90</sup> It is against this background that

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accusing the latter of perpetuating Jewish nationalism, while the latter criticising the former for betraying their Jewish roots and assimilating into Polish culture. See Eugenia Prokop-Janiec, *Polish-Jewish Literature in the Interwar Years*, trans. by Abe Shenitzer (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003).

<sup>87</sup> Quoted in Antony Polonsky, ‘“Why did they hate Tuwim Boy so much?” Jews and “Artificial Jews” in the Literary Polemics in the Second Polish Republic’, in *Antisemitism and Its Opponents in Modern Poland*, pp. 189–209 (p. 193).

<sup>88</sup> See Magdalena M. Opalski, ‘*Wiadomości Literackie*: Polemics on the Jewish Question, 1924–1939’, in *The Jews of Poland between Two World Wars*, ed. by Yisrael Gutman and others (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1989), pp. 434–452.

<sup>89</sup> Józef Wittlin, ‘Letter to Jerzy Giedroyc, 4 April 1949’, quoted in Zajączkowski, ‘Wolne usta poety: Ethos słowa Józefa Wittlina’ [The Poet’s Free Lips: Józef Wittlin’s Verbal Ethics], p. 263.

<sup>90</sup> Wittlin, [Diaries], vi: 1938–1940, [January 1940, p. 369]. Wittlin’s statement has a ring of bitter irony about it, since he would have been considered a Jew by the Nazis even if he had got baptised and renounced the Judaic faith of his ancestors. In the 1930s, the Nazis took sustained effort to construct the Jew as a racial category. As Saul Friedländer observes, among the scientists associated with the Nazi Party, there existed ‘a widespread belief [...] that scientific racial criteria for identifying the Jew could be discovered’ (p. 119). Zygmunt Bauman argues that ‘[u]nlike Judaism, Jewishness had to be, emphatically, stronger than human will and human creative potential. It had to be located at the level of natural law (the kind of law that ought to be discovered, and then taken account of and exploited for

Wittlin's poetry of the 1930s–1940s has to be read. It is informed by his desperate search for a Christian ideal that would be powerful enough to defy the nationalist and exclusivist understanding of Catholicism. It was Francis of Assisi who provided Wittlin with such a model, which became particularly pronounced in 'Saint Francis and the Poor Jews' (1932):

Your name is called in vain by  
The rich, proud, righteous, and satiated.

Because you, if you were alive,  
Would surely come to us who are beaten.

We poor, ragged Jews,  
We spiritual lepers  
Walking around with the yellow badge.

You would not be repulsed by us,  
You, oh saint goy patriarch,  
To the least among us would say: brother,  
Brother scab!<sup>91</sup>

The poem, whose form resembles a prayerful invocation, establishes a contrast between two groups of people: those who are in power on the one hand, and Jews on the other. The former are described by means of the attributes that evoke and stand in contrast with some of the Beatitudes (Matthew 5.3–12). While Jesus blessed those who are 'poor

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human benefit, but which cannot be wished away, tampered with, or neglected – at least, not without terrible consequences)' (pp. 59–60). Thus, for the Nazis, Jews who converted to Christianity still remained Jews. As Hannah Arendt pointed out, 'Jews had been able to escape from Judaism into conversion; from Jewishness there was no escape' (p. 87). Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, 2 vols (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997), I: *The Years of Persecution, 1933-1939*; Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989); Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, new edn (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1979). The question of how to define Jewishness and whether to understand it as a religious or ethnic category is still relevant today; see, for instance, 'Who Is a Jew?: Competing Answers to an Increasingly Pressing Question', *The Economist*, 11 January 2014, pp. 51–52.

<sup>91</sup> Józef Wittlin, 'Święty Franciszek i biedni Żydzi' [Saint Francis and the Poor Jews], in *Poezje* [Poems], p. 111. For the Polish original, see Appendix 1.

in spirit', 'meek' and who 'hunger and thirst for righteousness', the second line of the poem speaks about those who are 'rich', 'proud', 'righteous' and 'satiated'. Thus, while the poem stops at this scanty characterisation, it makes it clear that the people referred to, who are presumably Christian, do not live in accordance with the Gospel ideal. The speaker, on pronouncing this judgement, reveals his association with the Jews, portrayed as 'poor' and 'ragged'. The gap existing between the two groups – the wealthy and satisfied Christians and the pauperised and needy Jews – is not only economic.

The Jews are the ones who suffer persecutions; they are 'beaten' and forced to wear 'the yellow badge'. Historically, the obligation to wear the yellow badge was first forced on Jews in 1215 by the Fourth Council of Lateran.<sup>92</sup> It was designed as an identifying mark that responded to the anxiety caused by the realisation that Jews 'cannot be distinguished by any difference' (Canon 68), and, unless they wear a distinguishing mark, their lack of observance of Christian festivals and holy days could scandalise Christian population. While the yellow badge was a medieval invention and was abolished by most European countries by the seventeenth century, its mention by Wittlin in 1932 proved ominously prophetic. Seven years later, when the Nazis invaded Poland, they reinstated the yellow badge, requiring all Jews to wear a Star of David badge or an armband under the threat of death.<sup>93</sup> The twentieth-century urge to construct the Jew as a separate and visibly distinct member of society, which found its fulfilment in the ideology of Nazism, was a response, Zygmunt Bauman argues, to the 'eroding power of social and legal equality and cross-cultural exchange'.<sup>94</sup> Without the badge, Jews could successfully pass for Christians and merge perfectly into modern society.

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<sup>92</sup> 'The Twelfth General Council (Fourth Lateran Council, 1215)', in *Disciplinary Decrees of the General Councils: Text, Translation and Commentary*, ed. by H. J. Schroeder (St Louis: Herder, 1937), pp. 236–296 (Canon 68, pp. 290–291). See also Guido Kisch, 'The Yellow Badge in History', *Historia Judaica*, 19 (1957), 89–146.

<sup>93</sup> See Philip Friedman, 'The Jewish Badge and the Yellow Star in the Nazi Era', *Historia Judaica*, 17 (1955), 41–70; and Sabine Doran, *The Culture of Yellow, or, the Visual Politics of Late Modernity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), esp. chapter 6: 'Yellow Stars and the Visual Politics of Genocide', pp. 159–188.

<sup>94</sup> Bauman, p. 58.

The poem calls the Jews ‘spiritual lepers’, pointing to a connection recurrent in anti-Semitic discourse. For centuries, Jews have been accused of literally transmitting infectious diseases; in the Middle Ages, they were suspected, together with lepers, of poisoning wells.<sup>95</sup> Since the medieval times, both groups have been marginalised, with lepers obliged to carry bells that warned other citizens that they were approaching and frequently forced to live in leper colonies, and with Jewish communities often confined to ghettos. The poem’s reference to the Jews as both ‘poor’ and ‘spiritual lepers’ evokes yet another beatitude: ‘Blessed *are* the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven’ (Matthew 5.3). Thus, the image of Jews as ‘spiritual lepers’ can be read both literally – Jews are like lepers because they are persecuted, despised, and excluded from society due to their spiritual otherness – and in a more religious way – as the ‘poor in spirit’ who, by virtue of their humility, stand in opposition to those who consider themselves righteous and morally superior. The speaker expresses his conviction that Francis, the ‘saint goy patriarch’, would recognise their poverty and choose their company over that of the self-satisfied.

It is through the person of Francis that the image of the leper gains yet another dimension. It evokes a story of Francis’s meeting with a leper, which eventually led to his spiritual metamorphosis and conversion to Christianity. Sabatier recounts this meeting in the following way:

He [Francis] was riding on horseback one day, his mind more than ever possessed with the desire to lead a life of absolute devotion, when at a turn of the road he found himself face to face with a leper. The frightful malady had always inspired in him an invincible repulsion. He could not control a movement of horror, and by instinct he turned his horse in another direction.

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<sup>95</sup> For a first-century discussion of such anti-Semitic prejudices, see Josephus, ‘Against Apion, or on the Antiquity of the Jews’, in Josephus, *The Life. Against Apion*, with an English translation by H. St. J. Thackeray, Loeb Classical Library, 186 (London: William Heinemann, 1961), pp. 161–411. See also Kisch, pp. 97–101.

If the shock had been severe, the defeat was complete. He reproached himself bitterly. To cherish such fine projects and show himself so cowardly! Was the knight of Christ then going to give up his arms? He retraced his steps and springing from his horse he gave to the astounded sufferer all the money that he had; then kissed his hand as he would have done to a priest. This new victory, as he himself saw, marked an era in his spiritual life.<sup>96</sup>

The passage shows Francis two years after he initially began contemplating leading a Christian life. He has gradually renounced his father's fortune, fasted, given alms, and spent time with the beggars of Assisi. And yet, Francis's meeting with the leper turns into a painful lesson of humility. His initial reaction to the leper – defined by fear and revulsion – shows his shock at facing a person whom he has been socialised to disregard and avoid. Thus, he approaches the leper not as his neighbour, but as a carrier of the 'frightful malady'. Shortly, however, comes a realisation that leprosy does not erase the leper's humanity, and objectifying him by defining him through his illness is deeply un-Christian. Francis's turning back and embracing the leper becomes literally his act of conversion (Latin *conversio* can be translated as 'turning around') and the moment when he accepts full Christian responsibility for his needy neighbour. The exposure of his deep-seated weakness – prejudice – taught Francis humility and made him aware that a life of renunciation in itself may not have much in common with the Christian ideal that inspired him. He realises, in Sabatier's words, that '[t]hose are more numerous than we think who, after severe experience, have renounced what the ancient liturgies call the world, with its pomps and lusts; but the greater number of them have not at the bottom of their hearts the smallest grain of pure love'.<sup>97</sup> Francis's meeting with the marginalised 'other' results in his spiritual transformation – a humble recognition that the Christian ideal of renunciation of worldly life cannot be divorced from an everyday praxis of charity towards others,

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<sup>96</sup> Sabatier, *Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, p. 26.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

especially those who are ignored and shunned. Thus, the speaker of Wittlin's poem expresses his conviction that in contemporary times Francis would embrace the Jews with as much charity as he embraced the leper: 'You would not be repulsed by us' and 'To the least among us would say: brother, | Brother scab!' Echoing the Gospel pronouncement: 'Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me' (Matthew 25.40), the final lines of the poem allude to Francis's custom of calling 'brothers' and 'sisters' all those with whom he interacted, as well as animals and inanimate objects of creation, as in his 'The Cantic of Brother Sun'.<sup>98</sup>

Francis's conversion leads him to reorient his life and follow a way to salvation that simultaneously grows into a radical social critique. Being a son of a wealthy merchant, he renounces his family's fortune and social privileges attached to it, becoming a beggar and pilgrim. Unlike Anna Csillag, who remains eternally detached and otherworldly, he feels compassion for those who are marginalised, persecuted, and 'beaten' – and distances himself from 'the rich, proud, righteous, and satiated'. This active attention to others' suffering that translates into a Christian praxis is what Wittlin found particularly inspiring in Francis's life. He explored it in a number of poems written during the Polish-Ukrainian War. Francis provided him with a model for overcoming the hatred and violence perpetrated during the conflict and in the inter-war period. In the 1920s, Wittlin records in his journal that 'to understand St Francis, one needs to [also be able to] stand by the side of the oppressors, and have compassion for them'.<sup>99</sup> This was precisely what Wittlin attempted to do in a number of poems he composed in this period.<sup>100</sup> In 'Do przeciwnika'

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<sup>98</sup> Known also as 'The Cantic of the Creatures'. See Francis of Assisi, 'The Cantic of the Creatures (1225)', in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, ed. by Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann and William J. Short, trans. by Regis J. Armstrong and others, 3 vols (New York: New York City Press, 1999–2001), I: *The Saint* (1999), pp. 113–114.

<sup>99</sup> Wittlin, [Diaries], I: 1920s–1932, [1920s, p. 31].

<sup>100</sup> Apart from this, Wittlin also attempted to challenge the common perception of the enemy. For instance, in 1933 he took a firm stance against a proposed boycott of German-language books that was to be a response to the Nazis' persecutions of Poles living in Germany. In an article written in defense of German authors, Wittlin argued that anger at Hitler's violence should not be turned against writers who did nothing to facilitate Hitler's rise to power. Józef Wittlin, 'W obronie książek niemieckich' [In Defense of German Books], *Wiadomości Literackie* [Literary News], 7 May 1933, p. 5.

(To the Adversary), he portrays a bloody battle after which two surviving soldiers look each other in the face and recognise each other's humanity.<sup>101</sup> 'Grzebanie wroga' (Burying Your Enemy) further explores the dialectic between the terms 'brother' and 'enemy' and the artificiality of this distinction. The speaker, charged with the task of burying the enemy's corpse, gradually develops an awareness that the semantic boundary between the words 'enemy' (*wróg*) and 'brother' (*brat*) is fluid and artificial:

I know only this: he is an enemy.  
Cause the shape of his hat is foreign and foreign are his buttons,  
Though his half-closed eyes and hand, that clutches the gun  
Is as much in pain  
Is as much tired  
As the hand of my brother, as my brother's palm.<sup>102</sup>

The poem echoes Francis's admonition 'Of Love', in which he pronounces that 'He truly loves his enemy who does not grieve because of the wrong done to himself, and who is afflicted for love of God because of the sin on his [brother's] soul and who shows his love by his works'.<sup>103</sup> It is love that enables one to overcome one's prejudices and socially imposed conventions and makes it possible to see a brother or sister in those from whom one is traditionally separated by political, social, economic, or religious boundaries, and that for Wittlin shapes a truly Christian worldview. The modern-day sainthood, his poems imply, does entail acting against established conventions and accepting a universal responsibility for others, especially those more vulnerable.

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<sup>101</sup> Wittlin, 'Do przeciwnika' [To the Adversary], in *Poezje* [Poems], pp. 53–55.

<sup>102</sup> Wittlin, 'Grzebanie wroga' [Burying Your Enemy], in *Poezje* [Poems], pp. 31–37 (p. 31, ll. 10–15).

<sup>103</sup> Francis of Assisi, 'Words of Admonition', p. 12.

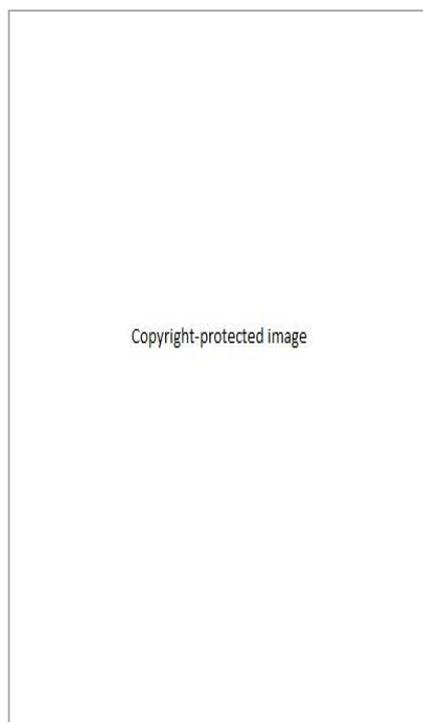


Figure 15. Józef Wittlin as Saint Francis of Assisi. A drawing by Władysław Doszewski accompanying a review of the second edition of Wittlin's volume *Hymny* [Hymns]. *Wiadomości Literackie* [Literary News], 8 January 1928, p. 3.

In his essay 'Wojna, pokój i dusza poety' (War, Peace, and the Poet's Soul, 1929), Wittlin voices his disillusionment with the way in which Christian churches have allied with political propaganda and abused religious discourse to incite hatred against those who at a given moment were considered 'enemies'. He proposes to turn to poetry as a means of unburying the truly revolutionary message of Christianity. 'Perhaps one day thanks to poetry,' he writes, 'if not anything else, we will become gentle and joyful, and will hurry to wash our bloody hands [...] and embrace each other.'<sup>104</sup> In the essay 'Apollon i Asklepios' (Apollo and Asclepius, 1938), Wittlin argues that poets are especially capable of following in the footsteps of Saint Francis because, just like medical doctors, they tend to be particularly sensitive to others and their suffering:

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<sup>104</sup> Wittlin, 'Wojna, pokój i dusza poety' [War, Peace, and the Poet's Soul], p. 44.

Honest poets and doctors, first and foremost, try to examine people, look into them, identify the source of suffering, and name what they have found. Then they try to describe the changes they have observed in the human body and soul.<sup>105</sup>

While the task of medicine is to alleviate suffering, the social but also the religious mission of poetry, Wittlin observes, is to describe it – to give voice to those who otherwise might not be heard.

### **Crossing the Boundaries: Christianity and the Non-Human**

Among those to whom poetry should give voice Wittlin includes, apart from the marginalised and suffering humans, the non-human world – animals and plants that cannot speak for themselves. In a number of essays written in the 1930s, Wittlin boldly challenges the conventional dichotomy between the human and the non-human. He circumscribes places of encounter in which traditional distinctions become blurred or even disappear. For the fact that such places are scarce, Wittlin argues, literature is partly to blame. In his 1938 review of Goethe's *Reineke Fuchs* (Reynard the Fox), Wittlin observes that throughout the ages – from Aesop and Aristophanes to La Fontaine and Goethe – literature has relied on anthropomorphic or allegorical representations of animals, turning them into exemplifications of certain human character types, virtues or vices. This manner of writing about animals, Wittlin argues, has systematically deprived them of their subjectivity, 'abusing the perceived impossibility of communicating with them'.<sup>106</sup> The basic flaw of this way of viewing animals, according to Wittlin, is that it judges their character features

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<sup>105</sup> Wittlin, 'Apollon i Asklepios' [Apollo and Asclepius], in *Orfeusz w piekle XX wieku* [Orpheus in the Inferno of the Twentieth Century], pp. 528–534 (p. 530), (first publ. in *Medycyna i przyroda* [Medicine and Nature], 1 (1938), 31–34).

<sup>106</sup> Wittlin, 'Lis, Goethe i Staff' [Fox, Goethe, and [Leopold] Staff], in *Orfeusz w piekle XX wieku* [Orpheus in the Inferno of the Twentieth Century], pp. 554–556 (p. 554), (first publ. in *Wiadomości Literackie* [Literary News], 1 November 1936, p. 4).

on the basis of their attitude to humans (for example, dogs are considered loyal, while cats sly). Wittlin objects to such a biased view and proposes to reverse it:

How would we look in the world of animal criticism that would be based on our attitude to them? I am afraid that a day may come when mammals, birds, reptiles and insects will begin to expose us. Woe unto us, if on the Judgement Day the animals that we sentenced here on earth to bellowing, howling, and keeping silent will speak out! Their witness may put us to great shame. [...] For the bloody sacrifices they suffer from our hands, they may deliver a full report.<sup>107</sup>

Wittlin meditates on the idea of writing a counter-history of the human-animal relationship that will attempt to transcend anthropocentrism and account for the silent presence of animals at crucial points of human history. Indeed, he himself writes several such pieces. In the poem 'Ból drzewa' (The Pain of the Tree), he gives voice to the tree whose wood was used to make the cross on which Jesus was crucified; in the poem 'Manna' (Manna), he builds an image of a restaurant as a temple of food where cooks and waiters perform bloody sacrifices; in the prose piece 'Struna' (The String), he describes a Mozart concert that had to be cancelled because a catgut string broke in remembrance of the suffering of the goat from whose intestines it was made.<sup>108</sup> Finally, in the poem 'Lament barana ofiarnego' ('Lament of a Sacrificial Ram'), in a Kierkegaardian fashion he rewrites the story of the sacrifice of Isaac, giving voice to the ram that Abraham killed instead of the boy.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 555.

<sup>108</sup> 'Ból drzewa' [The Pain of the Tree] was published in Wittlin, *Poezje* [Poems], pp. 68–74. 'Manna' [Manna] and 'Struna' [The String] remain in manuscript (Józef Wittlin, [Poetic Notebook, 1920s–1930s], Józef Wittlin Collection, Museum of Literature, Warsaw, MS 934, pp. [13, 44]).

<sup>109</sup> Józef Wittlin, 'Lament barana ofiarnego' ('Lament of a Sacrificial Ram'), in *Poezje* [Poems], pp. 142–144. I quote the English translation by Adam Gillon after Yurieff, pp. 150–152. While the poem was written later than other texts by Wittlin quoted in this chapter, I choose to discuss it here not only because of its immediate relevance, but because Wittlin began working on it as early as the 1930s (early drafts of the poem are part of the Józef Wittlin Collection, Museum of Literature, Warsaw, MS 935). The poem was finished in 1968, and published posthumously in 1978. Full texts of the Polish original and the English translation are included in Appendix 1.

‘Lament of a Sacrificial Ram’ is a particularly interesting poem because it engages with the ancient rabbinic midrashic interpretations of the sacrifice of Isaac, or the *Akedah*, to question the way in which the Judeo-Christian worship tradition has failed to account for animal suffering. It recounts the story of Genesis 22 from the perspective of the ram that has been silenced by both the Scripture and exegetical and devotional literature. This reversal of perspective brings to the fore questions that until the twentieth century neither Christian nor Judaic theology has ever addressed in detail. Such a revisionist re-writing of the story of Abraham and Isaac shows that, while traditionally it is considered to have its positive denouement with the angel coming down to rescue Isaac, it nevertheless ended with suffering and death. In the opening stanza of the poem, the ram calls into question the interpretative tradition according to which its life and suffering fares less than Isaac’s:

Why me? Because I am an animal  
and have no soul? Because my horns have got  
entangled fast in a thorny thicket  
so that I could not run away  
from the old man crazed with fear?

Their wisemen say that since the sixth day  
of world’s Creation I have been waiting  
on Mount Moriah for that knife  
so that my throat be cut and not the boy’s,  
so that instead of him upon the wood  
I burned. (1–11)

With this reversal of perspective, the pathos surrounding traditional religious interpretations of the story is deflated. Abraham, the great patriarch of the Old Testament, turns out to be an ‘old man crazed with fear’. The traditional midrashic interpretation of the story preserved in rabbinic literature is presented as a *post factum* justification of an act of cruelty. It has silenced the victim, writing the sacrifice into a prophetic providential

tale. And yet, as the ram reclaims its story, it reintroduces a very concrete account of suffering back into the picture, reasserting its weight:

The obedient patriarch fed the fire  
with aromatic roots, resin, incense,  
nard and myrtle – not to offend Him  
who asked the ancient father for such a horrid  
sacrifice, spare Him the smell of my burning  
innards, the stench of my injustice crying  
to the heavens –

And He was pleased with  
the smoke of my pain, aroma of my agony.  
Does it matter that I have no soul  
although my body feels the same anguish  
they do, and my heart thumps as fast  
from fear as theirs quail and freeze  
when the angel of death flutters his wings?

Was it necessary to have the sacrifice?  
Was it not enough to toy with the patriarch's heart,  
to quench His thirst for blind obedience?  
Why could he not have spared my life as well?  
To make good use of wood for burnt offerings?  
to keep the rust off the knife unstained by my blood?  
He counted too much on my ignorance,  
for I have no soul –

Yes, animals  
have no souls hence they cannot sin.  
We were not banished  
from paradise (12–37)

The two stanzas form a bitter accusation both against the sacred traditions that justify animal sacrifice or fail to explicitly critique it, and against God who could have demanded such a 'horrid sacrifice' and not been merciful enough to spare both the human

and the animal. The portrayal of God in these lines is that of a cruel tyrant, thirsty ‘for blind obedience’. While the ram, unlike Abraham, has no voice to plead with or complain to God, the ‘injustice’ it experiences cries in the stench of its ‘burning innards’. Yet God turns deaf to this ultimate expression of suffering and pain. On the contrary, he is ‘pleased with | the smoke of [...] pain, the aroma of [...] agony’. And yet, the ram objects, the experiences of fear, pain, agony are something that animals share with humans. It cannot find any convincing reasons why its life could not have been spared, discarding the theological argument that animals ‘have no souls’ as an insufficient justification for such an act. The following stanza invalidates this argument, recounting a similar cruelty performed against other members of the human species during the Holocaust: ‘Whole nations of two-legged scapegoats | endowed with souls burn in crematoria, | [...] and yet no angels fly downward | to stay the hangman’s hands from murder’ (43–47).<sup>110</sup> By juxtaposing the animal and human suffering, the poem does not seek to diminish either experience. Instead, it seeks to expose the brutality of those who perpetrate violence – whether they view it as a sacrifice to God or not – and calls into question the idea that there exists any moral justification for death that is violently inflicted on another living creature.

Ultimately, the poem constitutes a thorough critique of the Kierkegaardian notion of the ‘teleological suspension of the ethical’.<sup>111</sup> Abraham’s readiness to suspend the

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<sup>110</sup> One powerful interpretation of the poem is that it poses the fundamental question of how the Holocaust could have happened if God is perfectly good. This question has been extensively discussed in post-Holocaust theology, a field of its own within Judaic and Christian theology. Since here I read the poem in relation to Wittlin’s rethinking on the concept of Christian sainthood, a detailed discussion of the question of God after Auschwitz falls beyond the scope of my chapter. For different perspectives on this issue, see Eliezer Berkovits ‘Faith after the Holocaust’ (pp. 96–101), Irving Greenberg ‘Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity, and Modernity after the Holocaust’ (pp. 102–114), Amos Funkenstein, ‘Theological Interpretations of the Holocaust’ (pp. 172–182), Arthur A. Cohen, ‘Thinking the Tremendum: Some Theological Implications of the Death Camps’ (pp. 183–195), Franklin Sherman, ‘Speaking of God after Auschwitz’ (pp. 196–208), Robert E. Willis, ‘Auschwitz and the Nurturing of Conscience’ (pp. 209–222), and David Tracy, ‘Religious Values after the Holocaust: A Catholic View’ (pp. 223–249), in *A Holocaust Reader: Responses to the Nazi Extermination*, ed. by Michael L. Morgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>111</sup> See Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. by Sylvia Walsh, ed. by C. Stephen Evans and Sylvia Walsh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 46–59. For a detailed comparison of Kierkegaard’s and Wittlin’s rewritings of the story of Abraham and Isaac, see Krzysztof Kłosiński,

ethical in order to prove his obedience to God, the highest good and ideal, is presented in parallel with the way in which ethical values were suspended by the Nazis during the Holocaust. Religious traditions, as the following stanza narrating what happened with the remains of the ram shows, just like ideologies, can be grounded in the conspiracy of silence around the suffering of victims:

And the wisemen say: the fire failed  
to consume all of me on Mount Moriah;  
upon my bones, they say, a temple  
was built for Him; of my arteries  
they wove the strings for David's harp  
and my skin was used for a belt by Elijah  
the prophet who shall trumpet on  
the Mountain of Moriah, blowing  
my right horn (filed and drilled out)  
when the prayed-for Messiah at last comes  
to the descendants of the meek patriarch. (48–58)

The stanza gives the ultimate answer, then, to the ram's opening question of why the Jewish God would require the sacrifice of his life. Wittlin displays his familiarity with the Judaic tradition, referring here to the ancient midrashic interpretation of Isaac's sacrifice. According to the early rabbinic explications of the Torah, the remains of the ram were fully utilised for the sake of religious worship. As the ninth-century exegetical compilation *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* asserts:

From that ram, which was created at the twilight, nothing came forth which was useless. The ashes of the ram were the base which was upon the top of the inner altar. The sinews of the ram were the strings of the harp whereon David played. The ram's skin was the girdle (around) the loins of Elijah [...]. The horn of the

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'Cztery interpretacje ofiary Abrahama: Wokół wiersza Józefa Wittlina "Lament barana ofiarnego"' [Four Interpretations of the Binding of Isaac: On Józef Wittlin's poem 'Lament of a Sacrificial Ram'], in *Studia o twórczości Józefa Wittlina* [Studies on the Writings of Józef Wittlin], pp. 55–72.

ram of the left side (was the one) wherein He blew upon Mount Sinai, as it is said, ‘And it shall come to pass, that when the ram’s horn soundeth long’ (Josh. VI 5). (The horn) of the right side, which is larger than that of the left, is destined in the future to be sounded in the world that is to come, as it is said, ‘And it shall come to pass in that day, that a great trumpet shall be blown’ (Isa. XXVII 13); and it is said, ‘And the Lord shall be king over all the earth’ (Zech. XIV 9).<sup>112</sup>

Wittlin’s poem faithfully recalls the midrashic story, suggesting that the manner in which various parts of the ram’s corpse were used explains why the tradition has had to silence its voice. Its remains were used to build the altar in the temple, provide strings for David’s harp, belt for Elijah, and the horn that would announce Messiah’s coming. Thus, the suffering of the ram becomes inscribed into the space of worship, its language and music, and the robes of its prophet. The poem critiques the way in which the theological symbolism of these elements overwrites the bodily reality of the ram’s pain, suppressing its story of suffering. This accusation should not be read as directed only against the Judaic tradition either. It applies well to the traditional Christian teaching about the non-human world too. Augustine in *De Civitate Dei* observes: ‘when we read “You shall not kill” we assume that this does not refer to bushes, which have no feelings, nor to irrational creatures, flying, swimming, walking, or crawling, since they have no rational association with us [...]’<sup>113</sup> Similarly, Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologica* asserts:

What God has ordained is the conservation of the life of plants and animals, not for their own sake, but for the sake of man. [...] Brute animals and plants do not have the rational capacity to decide their own lives; they are rather driven by instincts as if from outside. And this is a sign of their natural servility and subjection to the purposes of others. He who kills another’s ox does indeed commit

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<sup>112</sup> Rabbi Eliezer, *Pirkê de Rabbi Eliezer*, trans. by Gerald Friedlander (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1916), pp. 229–230.

<sup>113</sup> Saint Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. by Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 31–32.

a sin, only it is not the killing of the ox but the infliction of proprietary loss on another that is the sin.<sup>114</sup>

Augustine's assertion that there is a 'lack of fellowship' between humans and animals and Aquinas's argument about the utilitarian value of animals' lives and their 'natural servility and subjection' are representative of essentially the same viewpoint that is denounced in the poem. In effect, the ram's lament puts the entire Judeo-Christian tradition into question. And yet, the ending of the poem seems to hint at a model of possible reconciliation:

Oh, blow at both my horns  
under the Wailing Wall,  
my pain does not count,  
my fear is of no import, for I have no soul.

And only once in this earth's annals  
the animals were called brothers – by a holy man. (59–64)

It is not by means of theological arguments on whether animals have or do not have souls, the final lines suggest, that religions can atone for the wrong they have done or been complicit in, but through praxis that re-enacts the inheritance of Saint Francis.

Thomas of Celano, a Franciscan friar and poet who knew Francis personally and wrote his first hagiography, emphasised his sense of connectedness and brotherhood with all the creation, to which the final line of Wittlin's poem refers:

he used to call all creatures  
by the name of 'brother' and 'sister'  
and in a wonderful way, unknown to others,  
he could discern the secrets of the heart of creatures

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<sup>114</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 61 vols ([Cambridge]: Blackfriars, 1964–1981), xxxviii: *Injustice* (2a2æ. 63–79), trans. by Marcus Lefébure (1975), Question 64, p. 21.

like someone who has already passed  
into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.<sup>115</sup>

Francis's sense of interconnectedness with both other humans and animals, which Wittlin also refers to in 'Saint Francis and the Poor Jews', was rooted in his belief that they were all, as 'children of God', united through the act of divine creation. The renunciation of ownership and endorsement of poverty, which lay at the heart of Franciscan spirituality and was inscribed in the Rule of the Order, stemmed from this perception of environment as a common good that was created by and ultimately belonged to God.<sup>116</sup> Francis considered humans to have a special calling to assume the responsibility of stewardship over the earth because, according to the narrative of Genesis, they were 'put [...] into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it' (Genesis 2.15).<sup>117</sup> In his writing, Francis called this responsibility 'Holy Obedience', and considered it one of the most important Christian virtues. In 'Salutation of Virtues', he meditates on the work it performs in humans to help them revive their relationship to other people and the non-human world:

Holy Obedience confounds  
every corporal and carnal wish,  
binds its mortified body  
to obedience of the Spirit  
and obedience to one's brother,

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<sup>115</sup> Thomas of Celano, 'The Life of Saint Francis', in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, pp. 171–308 (p. 251).

<sup>116</sup> Michael Robson, *St. Francis of Assisi: The Legend and the Life* (London: Continuum, 2002), pp. 94–118; and Agamben, pp. 109–143.

<sup>117</sup> Examples of how Francis understood this in practice abound. His early biographers relate numerous stories of how he freed animals that were about to be killed. For instance, Thomas of Celano recounts a story of how Francis saved the lives of lambs led to a slaughterhouse: 'On another occasion he [Francis] was traveling through the Marches [...] when he came across a man on his way to market. The man was carrying over his shoulder two little lambs bound and ready for sale. When blessed Francis heard the bleating lambs, his innermost heart was touched and, drawing near, he touched them as a mother does with a crying child, showing his compassion. "Why are you torturing my brother lambs," he said to the man, "binding and handing them this way?" "I am carrying them to market to sell them, since I need the money," he replied. The holy man asked: "What will happen to them?" "Those who buy them will kill them and eat them," he responded. At that, the holy man said: "No, this must not happen! Here, take my cloak as payment and give me the lambs." The man readily gave him the little lambs and took the cloak since it was much more valuable.' Thomas of Celano, p. 249.

so that it is  
subject and submissive  
to everyone in the world,  
not only to people  
but to every beast and wild animal as well  
that they may do whatever they want with it  
insofar as it has been given to them  
from above by the Lord.<sup>118</sup>

Francis linked the idea of responsibility for others with the virtues of humility and submissiveness, and ‘a deep sense of concern not only toward other humans in need but also towards mute, brute animals: reptiles, birds, and all other creatures whether sensate or not’.<sup>119</sup> Effectively renouncing the idea of ownership, he cultivated a sense of sacred connectedness with the surrounding world.

Wittlin’s explicit reference to Francis’s vision of an all-embracing fraternity of creation in the final line of the poem, which otherwise constitutes an indictment of the Judeo-Christian religions’ attitude to non-human suffering, suggests that he considered Francis’s ideal a viable and powerful model for modern Christianity. The strength of this model, Wittlin’s poem suggests, is that it results in what Giorgio Agamben calls the ‘neutralization of law with respect to life’.<sup>120</sup> Agamben argues that the radical novelty of

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<sup>118</sup> Francis of Assisi, ‘A Salutation of Virtues’, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, 1: *The Saint*, pp. 164–165 (p. 165).

<sup>119</sup> Thomas of Celano, p. 248. A similar stance is at present advocated by animal theology. The theologian Andrew Linzey points out that such a viewpoint ‘does not deny pain, suffering, and apparent waste and futility in nature, rather it begins with it and seeks to relate it to the wider Christian themes of creation and redemption’. In this framework, animal suffering is considered something that Christians should not unquestioningly accept, but rather work to expose and, where possible, alleviate. Andrew Linzey, ‘So Near and Yet So Far: Animal Theology and Ecological Theology’, in *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, ed. by Roger S. Gottlieb (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 348–361 (p. 352). See also Andrew Linzey, *Why Animal Suffering Matters: Philosophy, Theology, and Practical Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Roger S. Gottlieb, ‘Introduction: Religion and Ecology – What Is the Connection and Why Does It Matter?’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, pp. 3–21. For an overview of recent work in the field of religion and ecology, see Peter Manley Scott, ‘Which Nature? Whose Justice? Shifting Meanings of Nature in Recent Ecotheology’, in *God’s Bounty: The Churches and the Natural World*, ed. by Peter Clarke and Tony Claydon, *Studies in Church History*, 46 (Rochester, NY: Boydell, 2010), pp. 431–457.

<sup>120</sup> Agamben, p. 111.

Franciscan teaching ‘is not expressed in a new doctrine, but in a form of life through which the very life of Christ is made newly present in the world to bring to completion, not the historical meaning of the “person” in the economy of salvation, so much as his life as such’.<sup>121</sup> By following Jesus’s example, renouncing the right of ownership, and leading a life of voluntary poverty, Francis showed solidarity with those who were considered *pauperes* – and in Francis’s times this term was used not only with reference to those who were economically underprivileged, but referred also to the social status of those who had no rights apart from receiving alms and were ‘dependent on the system controlled by [their] lord and [...] powerless to change [their] social condition’.<sup>122</sup> Thus, not only those who suffered from penury were counted among the poor, but also those who lived on the margins of or even outside the medieval legal system – people who were socially invisible and left at the mercy of their masters. Francis’s and his followers’ radicalism consisted in defying the legal system that sustained such a situation and renouncing the right of ownership and social authority that it generated in order to elevate the value of life and creation as God’s gifts granted to everybody in the same manner.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p. 143.

<sup>122</sup> Michael F. Cusato, ‘Poverty’, in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy*, ed. by Robert Pasnau, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), II, pp. 577–592 (p. 579).

<sup>123</sup> This becomes evident in Francis’s definitive denunciation of the concept of superiority in ‘The Words of Admonition’: ‘I did “not come to be ministered unto, but to minister,” says the Lord. Let those who are set above others glory in this superiority only as much as if they had been deputed to wash the feet of the brothers; and if they are more perturbed by the loss of their superiority than they would be by losing the office of washing feet, so much the more do they lay up treasures to the peril of their own soul’ (pp. 10–11). Such an attitude led early Franciscans to a conflict with the Church authorities over the possible interpretations of the notions of ‘legal ownership’ (*dominium*) and ‘use’ (*usus*). See Cusato, pp. 589–592.

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Wittlin in his poems inspired by Francis's teaching gave voice to two groups that in the early twentieth century he considered marginalised and stripped of their rights and dignity – Jews and animals. The necessity of reaching out towards those who could be considered the twentieth-century *pauperes*, to which Wittlin repeatedly drew attention, occupied a central place in the agendas of numerous Modernist theologians.<sup>124</sup> Many of them were convinced that, as George Tyrrell put it, 'God wants to be loved in His creatures and not apart from them', which resonates strongly with the teaching of Saint Francis.<sup>125</sup> Thus, they sympathised with the labour movement and were keen on developing a Christian version of socialism that could offer a constructive alternative to the materialism of Marxism. The Polish Capuchin Izydor Wysłouch went as far as to explicitly condemn the Catholic authorities' critical stance towards socialism and its allegedly excessively revolutionary message, arguing that socialism 'grew out of the Christian ideal' and the 'revolutionary ideals of fraternity, equality, and justice' had been in fact first elaborated and put in practice by Jesus.<sup>126</sup> In his writing, Wysłouch repeatedly addressed the way in which the Catholic Church alienated industrial workers by failing to speak up in their defence. Wittlin in his poems endorsed a similar stance, emphatically rejecting the model of saintly detachment from contemporary issues embodied by Anna Csillag, and calling for a revision of the Christian ideal of sainthood modelled on the life of Saint Francis. His poetry suggests that modern-day Christians should be ready to assume responsibility (and thus, exercise Franciscan 'obedience') towards those whose suffering is rendered invisible by those in power. The modern saint, Wittlin wrote in his journal, is 'a person of both

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<sup>124</sup> On Christian socialism and Modernist theology, see also chapter 1, section 2: 'Mystical Revival in the Twentieth Century'.

<sup>125</sup> George Tyrrell, 'Letter to Henri Bremond, 16 September 1901', in *George Tyrrell's Letters*, pp. 51–52 (p. 52).

<sup>126</sup> Izydor Wysłouch, *Uwagi o socjalizmie* [Remarks on Socialism] (Kraków: M. Jastrzębiec, 1906), pp. 18, 54.

Transcendence and Immanence’, and his or her Christian praxis ought to constitute a ‘re-enactment of the image of the living God’. This, Wittlin observed, is ‘the only and sole condition of a full Christian engagement’ with the world of modernity.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Wittlin, [Diaries], ix: 1948–1951, [1948, p. 412], quoted in Zajączkowski, p. 272.

## Conclusion

In the course of this thesis, I have shown how the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century theological controversies closely informed the literary and artistic productions of the period. I situated Rilke, Eliot, and Wittlin within the religious landscape of theological Modernism to demonstrate that their poetry reveals a genuine engagement with the issues lying at the heart of the theological controversies of the time and their works can be read as literary responses to contemporary theologians' attempts to reconcile Christianity with modernity. Rilke in his cycle reinterpreted the medieval Orthodox icon as a form that through its polycentric, heterogeneous and dark vision of the divine enables individual believers to redefine their relationship with God in a dynamic, personal and idiosyncratic manner. Eliot explored the relationship between the Christian dogma and individual religious and mystical experience, presenting the former not as a fossilised remnant of the Middle Ages, but as an interpretative framework that plays a central role in Christian hermeneutics and remains in constant dialectic with personal experience. Wittlin engaged with the traditional hagiographic model of sainthood, which he redefined so as to highlight a Christian imperative that he considered crucial for modernity – empathic attentiveness to both human and non-human suffering.

In their works all three poets revived certain elements of the medieval Christian tradition – iconography, mysticism, and hagiography respectively – yet the manner in which each of them approached these traditions was informed by the specificity of the socio-historico-political contexts in which they wrote. Rilke's cycle was written at the turn of the century and published in 1906, Eliot's poems discussed here were composed between 1915–1930, and Wittlin's in the 1920s–1930s. The chronological framework of my thesis traced the differences in Rilke's, Eliot's and Wittlin's responses to the

theological controversies of the period by showing how Rilke's monk experiences his visions in blissful isolation, undisturbed by history, while Gerontion and the speakers of Wittlin's poems have already been shaped by the formative experience of their generation – World War I. The sense of distance between Rilke's meditation on the meaning of icons and Wittlin's reflection on modern, socially engaged sainthood was, in fact, addressed by Wittlin himself in a short article on Rilke's *The Book of Hours* published in 1935.

In his essay, Wittlin observes that Rilke's volume resembles a 'lost echo from a far-away century of silence, contemplation and ecstasy'.<sup>1</sup> He compares *The Book of Hours* to Gothic architecture, describing the volume in a sensual, synaesthetic way:

The manner in which stanzas hold together in *The Book of Hours* brings to mind Gothic architecture. Ogival arches protrude from the dark massifs, climb upwards towards the towers, and pierce heaven with their spires. [...] Dark thick flames of sounds burst towards heaven and wreath like heavy clouds. It is a combination of two mysticisms: Gothic and Orthodox.<sup>2</sup>

Wittlin's reading of Rilke emphasises the spiritual character of his poetry, but also its remoteness in time. Like a Gothic cathedral, it reminds one of the splendour of the Christianity of the past, yet remains strangely alien to the world recently traumatised by World War I. In his study of the Gothic cathedral of Chartres, Wittlin conceives of its structure as a separate, self-sufficient world that bears witness to the 'genius of Western Christianity'.<sup>3</sup> It is a place where one has to face the most difficult and unsettling questions – a 'zone, where human reflection on God borders on God's reflection on the human'.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Józef Wittlin, 'Rainer Maria Rilke i jego *Księga godzin*' [Rainer Maria Rilke and His *The Book of Hours*], *Skamander: Miesięcznik literacki* [Scamander: A Literary Monthly], 68/69 (March/April 1936), 154–159 (p. 154), (repr. in *Orfeusz w piekle XX wieku* [Orpheus in the Inferno of the Twentieth Century]), pp. 511–517).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>3</sup> Józef Wittlin, 'Chartres', *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* [Illustrated Weekly], 26 July 1930, pp. 642–625 (p. 624), (repr. in *Orfeusz w piekle XX wieku* [Orpheus in the Inferno of the Twentieth Century]), pp. 216–221).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 624.

The sculptures adorning the façade of the cathedral, which Wittlin calls ‘living stones’, reciprocate the gaze of visitors and, similar to the Orthodox icons in Rilke’s cycle, invite them to face the challenge of the ‘immense [...] truth enshrined in stone’.<sup>5</sup> And yet, Wittlin’s essay suggests, the meeting of the visitor with the cathedral in the 1930s is very different from that in the 1900s. What has changed is the specificity of the historical context in which the meeting takes place:

Above the cathedral’s towers hover military airplanes. Nearby, on the opposite hill, are the hangars. Above the centuries-old elevation of the arches, above the short-lived elevation of our small hearts – soar machines in which people sit. How best to act?<sup>6</sup>

Wittlin’s viewers, unlike Rilke’s, are caught in a conflict between the demands that the sacred splendour of the medieval cathedral and the vicissitudes of modernity represented as technologically advanced warfare, and symbolically portrayed as military airplanes that, ironically, can soar higher than the cathedral’s spires. In such a context, Wittlin suggests, it is morally dubious to retreat into the quietude of the cathedral and to renounce the world fraught with human suffering.<sup>7</sup> Thus, Wittlin’s model for the reconciliation of Christianity and modernity differs from Rilke’s in its emphasis on the social and environmental engagement. In the post-war world, Wittlin suggests, it is hardly possible to ever again experience silence equal to that in which Rilke’s monk encountered God.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 625.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Katarzyna Szewczyk-Haake discusses the implications of Wittlin’s essay in connection with Rilke’s poem ‘Archaic Torso of Apollo’, coming to a conclusion that both Rilke and Wittlin present art as impelling people to change their lives, but while in Rilke’s poem the encounter of the viewer with the torso of Apollo takes place in an isolated museum setting, Wittlin’s essay portrays a similar encounter within the post-World War I world. Szewczyk-Haake argues that ‘the efforts to become a better man, according to Wittlin, [...] come to nothing unless it is accompanied by a radical attempt to make the world a better place’. Katarzyna Szewczyk-Haake, ‘Co się z nami stanie albo o co Józef Wittlin mógłby zapytać Rainera M. Rilkego’ [What Will Come of Us, or What Could Józef Wittlin Ask Rainer M. Rilke About], *Teksty Drugie* [Second Texts], 1/2 (2012), 308–318 (p. 316).

The meeting with the divine, thus, no longer takes place in a perfect quietude, but instead is mediated through the human and non-human others.

Rilke's, Eliot's and Wittlin's poetic responses to contemporary religious controversies, I suggested, should be viewed not only as individual encounters, but rather as examples of a broader network of exchanges and interactions between the art and theology of the period, which constitute a yet under-researched aspect of the history of modernism. Thus, my aim throughout the thesis was to re-establish the place of theology within modernist studies and show that literary responses to contemporary religious controversies were an important part of the cultural landscape of the early twentieth century. A careful unravelling of the contexts in which they originated defies the conventional perception of cultural and aesthetic modernism as an exceptionally secular movement. As this thesis demonstrated, far from being antagonistic to modernist culture, the medieval Christian traditions could find new life in modernist poetry. Rilke's, Eliot's, and Wittlin's works prove that introducing Christian themes into early-twentieth-century literature should not be perceived as a utopian retreat into the medieval, but an inspiring or provoking attempt to reimagine modernity and its relation to religious tradition.

This study has opened up new directions that could be fruitfully pursued in modernist studies. While my thesis, due to its limited scope, examined works by three poets only, I believe that further research of a broader nature could reveal many more interactions and creative tensions between modernist culture and contemporary theology. Such research would profit from a comparative framework that would consider not only literary productions in various languages, but also works of visual arts, cinematography, and music. Primary material is abundant, as has been recently shown by Alexander Nagel's study *Medieval Modern*.<sup>8</sup> It offers a fascinating discussion of how the visual arts and architecture of the modernist period drew on the art of Latin Christendom, and argues

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<sup>8</sup> Alexander Nagel, *Medieval Modern: Art out of Time* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2012).

that what primarily appealed to a number of modernist artists and architects in medieval culture was that it ‘continually engaged in processes of translation and translocation’, and was ‘at bottom an art of displacement’.<sup>9</sup> Presenting an impressive range of examples of modernist art and architectural works that entered a dialogue with the Middle Ages – from the correspondences between Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger* and Cimabue’s *Madonna* to the Bauhaus School’s fascination with Gothic cathedrals to Kandinsky’s, Mondrian’s and Malevich’s preoccupation with the metaphysics of art – Nagel concludes that ‘[m]edieval art flared into view amidst the breakdown of belief in the system of the fine arts, in the museum object, in mimetic naturalism, [...] in Enlightenment aesthetics, in linear history and rationalist models of time, and in a modern, colonialist conception of Europe’.<sup>10</sup> Further research questions could address the continuities and discontinuities between the literary authors’ and visual artists’ dialogic encounters with medieval Christianity. Such research, all the more rewarding due to its interdisciplinary scope, could shed more light on the various fronts on which the relationship between modernity and Christianity was negotiated, helping us gain a more nuanced understanding of the creative tensions it produced.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 32–33.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 275.

## Appendix 1

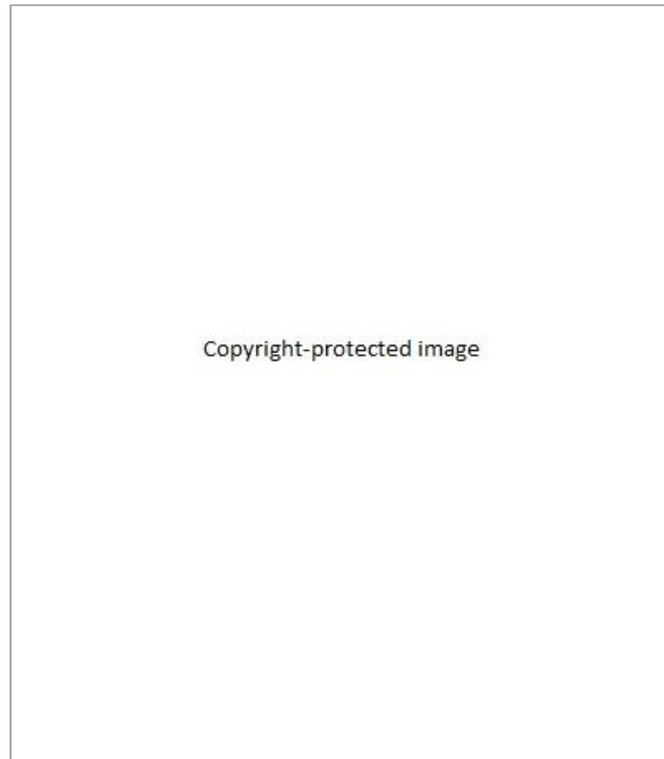
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## Appendix 2



Map 1. The Partitions of Poland. Source: Paul R. Magocsi, *Historical atlas of East Central Europe*, London: University of Washington Press, 1993, p. 71.

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Map 2. East Central Europe before World War I. Source: Paul R. Magocsi, *Historical atlas of East Central Europe*, London: University of Washington Press, 1993.



Map 3. Poland in the Twentieth Century. Source: Paul R. Magocsi, *Historical atlas of East Central Europe*, London: University of Washington Press, 1993, p. 131.

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